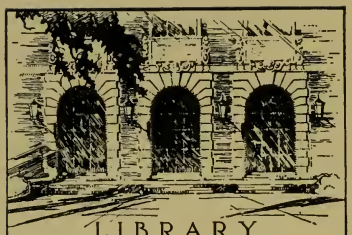

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THE THREE BROTHERS.

VOLUME I.

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THE THREE BROTHERS.

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT,

AUTHOR OF
'CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD,'
'SALEM CHAPEL,' 'THE MINISTER'S WIFE,'
ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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THE THREE BROTHERS.

CHAPTER I.

THEIR FATHER.

The reason why Mr. Renton's sons were sent out into the world in the humble manner, and with the results we are about to record, must be first told, in order that their history may be comprehensible to the reader. Had they been a poor man's sons no explanation would have been necessary; but their father was anything but a poor man. The family was one of those exceptional families which add active exertion to hereditary endowments. Though the Rentons had been well-known people in Berks for two or three centuries, it had almost been a family tradition that each successive heir, instead of resting content with the good things Providence had given him, should add by his own efforts to the family store. There had been pirates among them in Elizabeth's time. They had made money when everybody else lost money in the time of the 'South Sea.' Mr. Renton's father had gone to India young, and had returned, what was then called, a 'Nabob.' Mr.

Renton himself was sent off in his turn to Calcutta, as remorselessly as though he had not been the heir to heaven knows how many thousands a-year; and he too had increased the thousands. There was not a prettier estate nor a more commodious house in the whole county than Renton Manor. The town-house was in Berkeley Square. The family had everything handsome about them, and veiled their bonnet to none. Mr. Renton was a man who esteemed wealth as a great power; but he esteemed energy still more, and placed it high above all other qualities. As he is just about to die, and cannot have time to speak for himself in these pages, we may be permitted to describe a personage so important to this history. He was a spare, middle-sized man, with a singular watchfulness and animation in his looks; his foot springy and light; his sight, and hearing, and all his senses, unusually keen;—a man always on the alert, body and mind, yet not incapable of repose. Restless was not an epithet you could apply to him. A kind of vigilant, quiet readiness and promptitude breathed out from him. He would have sooner died than have taken an unfair advantage over any one; but he was ready to seize upon any and every advantage which was fair and lawful, spying it out with the eyes of an eagle, and coming down upon it with the spring of a giant. Twice, or rather let us say four times in his life he had departed from the traditions of the Rentons. Instead of the notable, capable woman whom

they had been wont to choose, and who had helped to make the family what it was, he had married a pretty, useless wife, for no better reason than that he loved her. And partly under her influence, partly by reason of a certain languor and inclination towards personal ease which had crept over him, he had been—as he sometimes felt—basely neglectful of the best interests of his sons. The eldest, Ben, had not been sent to India at sixteen, as his father was; nor had Laurie, the second, gone off to the Colonies, as would have been natural; and as for Frank, his father's weakness had gone so far as to permit of the purchase of a commission for him when the boy had fallen in love with a red coat. Frank was a Guardsman, and he a Renton! Such a thing had never been heard of in the family before.

The eldest surviving aunt, Mrs. Westbury, who was full of Renton traditions, almost went mad of this event, so afflicted was she by such a departure from use and wont. She had two boys of her own, whom she had steadfastly kept in the family groove, and, accordingly, had the very best grounds for her indignation. 'But what was to be expected,' she said, 'from such a wife?' Mrs. Renton was as harmless a soul as ever lay on a sofa, and had little more than a passive influence in the affairs of her family; but her husband's sister, endowed with that contempt for the masculine understanding which most women entertain, put all the blame upon her soft shoulders. Two

men-about-town, and a boy in the Guards! 'Is Laurence mad?' said Mrs. Westbury. It was her own son who had gone to the house in Calcutta, which might have mollified her; but it did not. 'My boy has to banish himself, and wear out the best of his life in that wilderness,' she said, vehemently, 'while Ben Renton makes a fool of himself at home.' When they brought their fine friends to the Manor for shooting or fishing, she had always something to say of her boy who was banished from all these pleasures; though, indeed, there had been a great rejoicing in the Westbury household when Richard got the appointment. It was but a very short time before her brother's death that Aunt Lydia's feelings became too many for her, and she felt that for once she must speak and deliver her soul.

'Ben is to succeed you, I suppose?' she said, perhaps in rather an unsympathetic way, as she took Mr. Renton to the river-side for a walk, under pretence of speaking to him 'about the boys.' He thought, poor man, that it was her own boys she meant, and was very good-natured about it. And then it was his favourite walk. The river ran through the Renton woods, at the foot of a steep bank, and was visible from some of the windows of the Manor. The road to it was a charming woodland walk, embowered in great beeches, the special growth of Berks. Through their vast branches, and round about their giant trunks, playing with the spectator's charmed vision like a child, came

glimpses of the broad, soft water, over which willows hung fondly, and the swans and water-lilies shone. Mr. Renton was not sentimental, but he had known the river all his life, and was fond of it;—perhaps all the more so as he found out what mistakes he had made, and that life had not been expended to so much purpose as it ought to have been; so that he walked down very willingly with his sister, and inclined his ear with much patience and good-nature to hear what she had to say about her boys.

'Ben will succeed you, I suppose?' she said, looking at him in a disapproving way, as they came to the very margin of the stream where Laurie's boat, with its brightly painted sides and red cushions reflected in the water, lay moored by the bank. It was a fantastic little toy, meant for speed, and not for safety; and Mrs. Westbury would have walked ten miles round by Oakley Bridge rather than have trusted herself to that arrowy bark. She sighed as her eyes fell upon it. 'Poor Laurie! poor boy!' she said, shaking her head. The sight seemed to fill her with a compassion beyond words.

'Why poor Laurie?' said Mr. Renton; but he knew what she meant, and it made him angry. 'Of course Ben will succeed me. I succeeded my father. It is his right.'

'Ah, Laurence, but how did you succeed your father?' said Mrs. Westbury. 'You had the satisfaction of being the greatest comfort to dear papa.

He felt the property would be safe in your hands, and be improved, as it has always been. People say we are such a lucky family, but you and I know better. We know it is work that has always done it,—alas! until now!' she said, suddenly lifting up her eyes to heaven. Truth compels us to add that Mr. Renton was very much disconcerted. He could not bear to hear his own family attacked; but he felt the justice of all she said.

'Well, Lydia, manners change,' he said. 'It seemed natural enough in our time; but, when you come to consider it, I don't see what reason I have for sending the boys away. I can leave them very well off. We were never so well off as we are now. You know I managed to buy that last farm my father had set his mind upon. I don't see why I should have broken their mother's heart.'

'Ah, I knew it would come out,' said Mrs. Westbury, with a little bitterness. 'Why should Mary's heart be more tender than other people's? I have to send my boys away, though I love them as well as she does hers; and people congratulate me on having such a good appointment for Richard. It never occurs to anybody that I shall break my heart.'

'You are a Renton,' said her brother, with some dexterity. 'I often think you are the best Renton of us all. But if poor Westbury had lived, you know, he might have contrived to spare you the parting, as I have spared Mary; and —— The

short and the long of it is the boys are doing very well. I have no fault to find with them, and I mean to take my own way with my own family, Lydia; no offence to you.'

'Oh, no; no offence,' said Mrs. Westbury, with a little toss of her head. 'It is all for my advantage, I am sure. When my Richard comes home at a proper time with the fortune your Ben ought to have made, I shall have no reason to complain for one.'

'Ben will be very well off,' said Mr. Renton, but with an uncomfortable smile.

'Oh, very well off, no doubt,' said his sister, with a touch of contempt; 'a vapid squire, like the rest of them. People used to say the Rentons were like a fresh breeze blowing in the county. Always motion and stir where they were! And, poor Laurie!' she added once more, with offensive compassion, as they turned and came again face to face with Laurie's boat.

'I should like to know why Laurie so particularly excites your pity,' said Mr. Renton, much irritated. Laurie was his own namesake and favourite, and this was the animadversion which he could least bear.

'Poor boy! I don't know who would not pity him,' said Aunt Lydia; 'it would melt a heart of stone to see a boy with such abilities all going to wrack and ruin. It is all very well as long as he is at home; but when he comes to have his own money

what will he do with it? Spend it on pictures and nonsense, and encourage a set of idle people about him to eat him up. Laurence, you mark my words —that is just the kind of boy to be eaten up by everybody, and to come to poverty in the end. Whereas, if he had been taught from the first that work was the natural destiny of man——'

'There, Lydia,—there,—I wish you would make an end of this croaking,' cried Mr. Renton. 'I am not quite well to-day, and can't bear it. That's enough for one time.'

'As for Frank, I give him up,' said Mrs. Westbury,—'a soldier, that can never make a penny,—and, of all soldiers, a Guardsman! I am very sorry for you, Laurence, I am sure. How a man of your sense could give in so to Mary's whims I can't understand.'

'Mary had nothing to do with it,' said Mr. Renton angrily; and he led the way up the bank, and changed the subject abruptly. Mrs. Westbury, though she was not susceptible, felt that she must say no more; and they returned in comparative silence to the house. This walk had been taken late in a summer evening after dinner, and in the solemnity of evening dress, over which, Aunt Lydia, who was stout and felt the heat, had thrown a little shawl. As they reached the lawn in front of the Manor they came upon a pretty scene. Mrs. Renton, who was feebly pretty still, lay on a sofa, which had been

brought out and placed in the shadow of the trees. Mary Westbury, her godchild, who bore a curious softened resemblance to her mother, sat upright on a footstool by her aunt's side, working and talking to her. The third figure was Laurie, lying at full length on the soft grass. Probably since dinner he had been having a cigar; for instead of the regular evening coat he wore a fantastic velvet vestment, which half veiled the splendour of his white linen and white tie. He was lying stretched out on his back,—handsome, lazy, and contented,—a practical commentary on his aunt's speech. There were books lying about, which his energetic cousin had been coaxing and boring him to read aloud; but Laurie had only shaken his head at her, ruffling his chestnut locks against the grass: and a little sketch-book lay by his side, where it had fallen from his indolent hand. Mrs. Westbury looked at him and then at her brother. What words could say as much? There lay lazy Laurence, with an unspeakable sentiment of *far niente*, in every line of him; and he a Renton, whose very ease had always been energetic! Mr. Renton saw it, too, and, for once in his life, was heartily ashamed of his favourite son.

'There you lie,' said Aunt Lydia, 'resting after your hard day's work. What a laborious young man you must be, Laurie! I never saw any one who wanted so much rest.'

'Thanks,' said Laurence, with a little nod of his chin from the grass. 'My constitution requires a

great deal of rest, as you say. If you don't mind moving a little, Aunt Lydia, you are sitting on my note-book. Thanks. There are some swans there I should not like to lose.'

'And of what use are swans?' said Mrs. Westbury. 'I wish you would tell me, Laurie; I am such an ignorant creature, and I should like to know.'

'Use?' said Laurie, opening his eyes. 'They don't get made into patties, as far as I know;—but they are of about as much use as the most of us, I suppose.'

'The most of us have a great deal to do in the world,' said Aunt Lydia, growing very red, for she was fond of *pâtés;* 'if you knew how many things have to pass through my hands from morning to night——'

'Yes, I know,' said lazy Laurence, raising his hand in soft deprecation. 'Mary has been telling us;—but what is the use of that, Aunt Lydia? Why should you worry yourself? Things would go on just as well if you let them alone,—that's what I always tell Ben. What's the good of fidgeting? If you'll believe,' continued Laurie, raising himself a little on one elbow, 'all the people who have ever made any mark in the world have been people who knew how to keep quiet and let things work themselves out. There's your Queen Elizabeth,' he said, warming to his subject, and giving a slight kick with his polished boot to a big volume on the grass; 'the only

quality she had was a masterly inaction. She kept quiet, and things settled themselves.'

'Oh, Laurie! not when she killed that poor, dear, Queen Mary!' cried his mother from the sofa. 'I hate that woman's very name.'

'No,' said Laurie, gracefully sinking down again among the grass, 'that's an instance of energy, mother,—a brutal quality, that always comes to harm.'

'Laurence, you are a fool!' said Mr. Renton sharply, to his son's surprise; and he turned his back upon them all abruptly, and went in across the soft grass, through the magical, evening atmosphere that tempted all the world to rest. His sister had taken all restfulness out of him. Though he was a sensible man, he was a Renton; and the family traditions when thus recalled to his mind had a great power over him. He went into the library, which looked out upon a dark corner of the grounds full of mournful evergreens; the blank wall of the kitchen-garden showed a little behind them, and the room at this time of day was a very doleful room. It was a kind of penance to put upon himself to come in from that air, all full of lingering hues of sunset and soft suggestions of falling dew, to the grim-luxurious room, in which he already wanted artificial light. Here he sat and pondered over his own life, and that of his boys. Up to this moment they had been a great deal happier than he had been. Like a gust of air from the old plains of his youth, a remembrance came over him of loneliness

and wistfulness, and a certain impossible longing for a little pleasure now and then, and some love to brighten the boyish days. He had not been aware of wanting those vanities then; but he saw now that he had done so, and that his youth had been very bare and unlovely. He had scattered roses before his sons, while only thorns had been in his own path; but what if he had kept from them the harder training which should make them men? He sat till the darkness grew almost into night thinking over these things. They were men now,—the lads. Ben was five-and-twenty; Laurie but a year younger; and Frank, the happy boy, was only twenty, glorious in his red coat. Mr. Renton pondered long, and when the lamp came he made a great many notes and calculations, which he locked up carefully in his desk. He had a headache, which was very unusual. It was his wife's *rôle* in the family to have the headaches; and it did not occur to Mr. Renton that there could be anything the matter with him. It was the heat, no doubt, or a little worry. The ladies had come into the drawing-room when his ponderings were over. It was a large room, full of windows, with one large bow projecting out upon the cliff, from which you could see the river through the cloud of intervening beeches. On the other side the room was open to the soft darkness of the lawn. There were two lamps in it, but both were shadowed; for Mrs. Renton's eyes, like her head, were weak; and the cool air of night breathed in, odorous and soft,

making a scarcely perceptible draught from window to window. Mrs. Renton lay quite out of this current of air, which naturally she was afraid of, on another sofa. Mary made tea in a corner, with the light of one of the lamps falling concentrated upon her pretty hands in twinkling motion about the brilliant little spots of china and silver. She had a ring or two upon her pink transparent fingers, and a bracelet, which sparkled in the light. Mrs. Westbury sat apart in a great chair, and fanned herself. Now and then, with a dash against the delicate *abat-jour* of the lamp, came a mad moth, bent on self-destruction. Mr. Renton dropped into the first chair he could find, not knowing why he was so uncomfortable, and Mary brought him some tea. The weather had been very warm, and everybody was languid with the heat. They all sat a great way apart from each other, and were not energetic enough for conversation. 'Where is Laurie?' Mr. Renton asked; and they told him that Laurie, with his usual wilfulness, had gone down to the river. 'There will be a moon to-night,' Mrs. Renton said, with some fretfulness; for she liked to have one of her boys by her, if only lying on the grass, or on the deep mossy carpet, which was almost as soft as the grass.

'He has gone off to his moonlight, and his swans, and his water-lilies,' said Mrs. Westbury, with disdain; but even she felt the heat too much to proceed.

'The water-lilies are closed at night,' said Mary apologetically; venturing to this extent to take her cousin's part; lazy Laurence was a favourite with most people, though he had no energy. Then, all at once, a larger swoop than usual went circling through the dim upper atmosphere of the room, and Mrs. Renton gave a scream.

'It is a bat!' she cried. 'Ring, Mary, ring,—I am so superstitious about bats; and Laurie out all by himself on that river. Mr. Renton, I wish you would put a stop to it. I never can think it is safe. Oh, tell them to drive out that creature, Mary! I always know something must happen when a bat comes into one's room.'

'No, godmamma, never mind,' said Mary. 'It is only the light. How should a bat know anything that was going to happen? They come into the Cottage every evening, and we never mind.'

'Then you will be found some morning dead in your beds,' said Mrs. Renton; 'I know you will. Oh, it makes me so unhappy, Mary! and Laurie all by himself in that horrid little boat!'

'Laurie is all right,' said Mr. Renton; 'he knows how to manage a boat, if he knows nothing else.' This was muttered half to himself and half aloud; and then he went to the bow-window and looked out upon the river. The moon had just risen, and was shining straight down upon one gleam of water which blazed intensely white amid all the darkling shadows.

As Mr. Renton stood looking out, a boat shot into this gleaming spot, with long oars glistening, balancing, touching the water like wings of a bird. 'Laurie is all right,' he said to himself, in a mechanical way. He did not himself care for a thousand bats. But his wife's alarm struck into his own uneasiness like a key-note,—the key-note to something he could not tell what. It was all so lovely and peaceful as he looked, soft glooms, soft light, rustling rhythm of foliage, wistful breathing of the night air over that pleasant landscape he knew so well. After all, was it not better to have the boy there in his boat, than scorching out in India or toiling like a slave in some Canadian or Australian forest? What is the good of the father's work but to better the condition of the sons? But, on the other hand, if life when it came should find the sons incapable? Mr. Renton had been a prosperous man; but he knew that life was no holiday. When it came like an armed man with temptations, and cares, and responsibilities upon that silken boy, how would he meet it? These were the father's thoughts as the bat was hunted out with much commotion, and his wife lay sighing on her sofa. If he had been well, probably, Mrs. Wesbury's talk would have had no such effect upon him; but he was not well; and it had made him very ill at ease.

Next day his lawyer came, and was closeted for a long time with him, and there were witnesses called in, —the Rector who happened to be calling, and the

lawyer's clerk—to witness Mr. Renton's signature. And within a week, though he was still in what is called the prime of life, the father of the house was dead; and his will alone remained behind him to govern the fate of his three sons.

CHAPTER II.

THE WILL.

There was great consternation in the family when this sudden misfortune came upon it. All the bustling household from the Cottage overflowed into the Manor in the excitement of the unlooked-for event; and the eldest and the youngest son came as fast as the telegraph could summon them to their father's bedside. During the two or three days of his illness the three young men wandered about the place, as young men do when there is fatal illness in a house—useless,—not liking to go about their usual employments, and not knowing what else to do. They took silent walks up and down to the river, and cast wistful looks at the boats, and dropped now and then into ordinary conversation, only to break off and pull themselves up with contrition when they remembered. They were very good sons, and felt their father's danger, and would have done anything for him; but there are no special arts or occupations made for men in such circumstances. The only alternative the poor boys had was to resort to their ordinary pleasures, or

to do nothing; and they did nothing, as that was the most respectful thing to do,—and were as dispirited and miserable as heart could desire.

On the last day of all they were called up together to their father's death-bed. He had known from the first that he was going to die; and Mrs. Westbury, who was his principal nurse, and a very kind and patient one, had felt that her brother had something on his mind. More than once she had exhorted him to speak out and relieve himself; but he had always turned his face to the wall when she made this proposition. It was a close, warm, silent afternoon when the boys were called up-stairs; a brooding calm, like that which comes before a thunder-storm; a yellow light was all over the sky, and the birds were fluttering about with a frightened, stealthy look. Even the leaves about the open windows shook with a terrified rustling,—clinging, as it were, to the human walls to give them support in this crisis of nature. The light was yellow in the sick-room, for the patient would not have the day excluded, as it is proper to do. He looked like an old man on his bed, though he was not old. The reflection of lurid colour tinged the ashen face with yellow. He called them to him, and looked at them all with keen anxiety in his eyes.

'Well,' he said, 'I'm going, boys;—it's unexpected, but one has to give in. I hope you'll all do well. If you don't do well, I'll get no rest in my grave.'

'Don't you trust us, father?' cried Ben, who was the eldest, with a thickness in his voice. 'We'll do as you have done. That will be our guide. But don't think of us,—think of yourself now.'

'You can't do as I have done,' said the father; 'I started different. Perhaps it is too late now. Laurie, you will not blame me? And, Frank, my boy, it won't make so much difference to you. Frank's but a boy, and Laurie's very soft-hearted—' he said, as if to himself.

'Then it is me you are afraid of, father?' said Ben, whose face darkened in spite of himself. 'If I have done anything to make you distrust me, God knows I did not mean it. Believe me now.'

'The boy does not know,' said Mr. Renton to himself, in a confused way; and then he added more loudly, 'I don't distrust you. You've always been a good lad; but it's hard on you,—ay, it's hard on Ben,—very hard;—I wonder if I should have done it!' said the dying man. They could get very little more out of him as they stood round his bed, grave, sorrowful, and bewildered, looking for other words, for another kind of leave-taking. He bade them no farewell, but mused and murmured on about something he had done; and that it would be hard on Ben. It was not the kind of scene,—of conscious farewell and tender adieu,—the last words of the dying father, which we are so often told of; but perhaps it was a more usual state of mind at such a

moment. His intelligence was lost in mists, from the coming end. Energy enough to be coherent had forsaken him. He could do nothing but go over in his enfeebled mind the last great idea that had taken possession of him. 'Your mother had nothing to do with it,' he said; 'she knows no more than you do. And don't think badly of me. It has all been so sudden. How was I to know that a week after,—is it a week?—without any time to think, I should have to die? It's very strange,—very strange,' he added, in a tone of musing, as if he were himself a spectator; 'to go right away, you know, from one's business, that one understands,—to——'

Then he paused, and they all paused with him, gazing, wondering, penetrated to the heart by that suggestion. Frank, who was the youngest, wept aloud. Mary Westbury, behind the curtain at one side of the bed, busied herself, noiselessly, in smoothing the bed-clothes, and arranging the drapery, so as to shade the patient's eyes, with trembling hands, and trembling lips, and tears that dropped silently down her white cheeks. These two being the youngest were the most overcome. But there was no harshness or coldness about the bedside of the prosperous man. They had all perfect faith in him, and no fear that he was going out of the world leaving any thorns in their path. His words seemed to them as dreams. Why should they think badly of him? What could they ever have to forgive him? There had never been any

mystery in the house, and it was easier to think their father's mind was affected by the approach of death than to believe in any mystery now.

Mr. Renton died that night; and it was on a very sad and silent house that the moon rose—the same moon which he had watched shining on Laurie's boat. Mrs. Renton, poor soul, shut herself up in her room, taking refuge in illness, as had been her habit all her life, with Mary nursing and weeping over her. Aunt Lydia, worn out with watching, went to bed as soon as 'all was over.' The lads were left alone. They huddled together in the library where all the shutters had been closed, and one lamp alone burned dimly on the table. Only last night there had still been floods of light and great windows open to the sky. They gathered about the table together, not knowing what to do. Nothing could be done that night. It was too soon to talk of plans, and of their altered life. They could not read anything that would have amused their minds; that would have been a sin against the proprieties of grief; so the poor fellows gathered round the dim lamp, and tried to talk, with now and then something that choked them climbing into their throats.

'Have you any idea what he could mean by that, —about me,—about it being hard?' said Ben, resting his head on both his hands, and gazing steadfastly with two dilated eyes into the light of the lamp.

'I don't think he could mean anything,' said

Laurie, 'unless it was the responsibility. What else could it be?'

'There must always have been the responsibility,' said Ben. 'He spoke as if it were something more.'

'His mind was wandering,' said Laurie; and then there was a long pause. It was broken by Frank with a sudden outburst.

'Ben, you'll be awfully good to poor mamma,' cried the boy; 'she can't bear things as we can.' The two elder ones held their breath tightly when Frank's sob disturbed the quiet; — they were too much men to sob with him,—and yet there came that convulsive contraction of the throat. The only thing to be done was to grasp each other's hands silently, not daring to look into each other's faces, and to go to bed,—to take refuge in darkness and solitude, and that soft oblivion of sleep, universal asylum of humanity, to which one gains access so easily when one is young! Stealthily, on tiptoe, each one of Mr. Renton's sons paid a secret visit to the dimly-lighted room, all shrouded and covered, with faint puffs of night air stealing in like spirits through the shuttered windows, where their father lay all quiet and at rest. True tears,—genuine sorrow was in all their hearts; and yet——

As each went away with a heart strained and exhausted by the outburst of grief, something of the new life beyond, something that breathed vaguely across them in the dark, like the air from the window, filled

the impatient human souls within them. The one idea could not retain undisturbed possession even so long as that. The world itself could no more stand still, poising itself in its vast orbit, than the spirits of its inhabitants. It was not that Ben thought of his new wealth, nor Laurie of his future freedom; but only that a thrill of the future passed through them, as they stood for this melancholy moment by the death-bed of their past.

Five days passed thus, each of them as long as a year. Duty and propriety kept the young men indoors, in the languid stillness; or if they went out at all, it was only for a disconsolate stroll through the grounds, on which, sometimes singly, sometimes in pairs, they would set out, saying little. The funeral relieved them from the painful artificiality of this seclusion. When they met together after it, it was with faces in which there was neither fear nor hope, that the sons of the dead man appeared. Their father had always been just to them and kind, and they had no reason to expect that he could have been otherwise in the last act of his life. The persons present were Mrs. Renton, Mrs. Westbury, her children Mary and Laurence, and the three Renton boys; with the lawyer, Mr. Pounceby, and his clerk, and a few old friends of the family, who had just accompanied them from the grave. They all took their places without excitement. He might have left a few legacies, more or less, but nobody could doubt what would be the

disposal of his principal property. The ladies sat together, a heap of mournful crape, at one end of the room. The whole company was quiet, and languid, and trustful. There was no anxiety in any one's mind,—unless, indeed, it was in that of Mr. Pounceby, who did not look to be at his ease. For the first quarter of an hour he did nothing but clear his throat; then he had a blind pulled up, that he might have a light to read by; then he pulled it down, because of a gleam of the sun that stole in and worried him. His task was such that he did not like to begin it, or to go through it when begun. But with the obtuseness of people who have not their attention directed to a subject, nobody noticed his confusion; he had a cold, no doubt, which made him clear his throat;—he was always fidgety;—they were not suspicious, and found nothing out.

'I ought to explain first,' said Mr. Pounceby, 'I promised my excellent friend and client,—my late excellent client,—to make a little explanation before I read what must be a painful document, in some points of view. Mr. Ben Renton, I believe your father was particularly anxious that it should be explained to you. He sent for me suddenly last week. It was, alas! only on Friday morning that I came here by his desire. He wanted certain arrangements made. Boys,' said Mr. Pounceby, who was an old friend, turning round upon them, 'I give you my solemn word, had I known how little

time he would have lived to think it over, or change again, if necessary, I should never have had any hand in it,—nor would he,—nor would he. Had he thought his time was running so short, he would have made no change.'

Then there ensued a little movement among the boys, which showed how correct their father's opinion of all the three had been. Frank bent forward with a little wonder in his face, poising in his fingers a paper-knife he had picked up, and looked calmly on as a spectator; Laurie only woke up as it were from another train of thought, and turned his eyes with a certain mild regret towards the lawyer; Ben alone, moved out of his composure, rose up and faced the man, who held, as it seemed, their fate in his hands. 'Whatever my father planned will no doubt be satisfactory to us,' he said firmly. 'You forget that we are ignorant what change was made.'

He began to read now, but to an audience much more interested than at first. There was, of course, a long technical preamble, to which Ben listened breathlessly, his lips slightly moving with impatience, and a hot colour on his cheeks, and then the real matter in question came.

Mr. Pounceby shook his grizzled head, 'It was a great change that was made,' he said; 'but I will not waste your time with further explanation. As you say, what your excellent father arranged, will, I hope, be satisfactory to you all.

'"Having been led much to think in recent days of the difference between my sons' education and my own, and having in addition a strong sense that without energy no man ever made any mark in this world, I have made up my mind, after much reflection, to postpone the distribution of my property among my children until seven years from the date of my death. In the meantime I appoint my executors to receive all my income and revenue from whatsoever sources,—rents, interest on stock, mortgages, and all other investments, as afterwards described,—and to hold them in trust, accumulating at interest, until the seventh anniversary of my death, when my first will and testament, which I have deposited in the hands of Mr. Pounceby, shall be read, and my property distributed according to the stipulations therein contained.

'"It is also my desire, which I hereby request my said executors to carry out, that my sons should receive respectively a yearly allowance of two hundred pounds. I do this with the object of affording to my boys the opportunity of working their own way, and developing their own characters in a struggle with the world, such as every one of their kindred from the earliest time has had to do, and has done, with a success of which their own present position is a proof. If they shrink from the trial I put upon them, they will be the first of their name who have ever done so. As to the final distribution of the property, in order

that no untimely revelation may be made, I request my executors to retain my will in their possession unopened until the day I have mentioned,—the seventh anniversary of my decease."'

Up to this moment all the audience had listened breathless, with a mixture of wonder, dismay, and alarm, to this extraordinary document. It is a mild statement of the case to say that it took them by surprise. The boys themselves rose up one after the other to bear the shock which came upon them so unexpectedly, and bore it like men, holding their breath, and clenching their hands to give no outward expression. Ben was the foremost of the three, and it was with him that the struggle was hardest. His pride was wounded to the quick, and it was strong within him. He was wounded, too, in his love and respect for his father, of whose justice and goodness he had never for a moment till now entertained a doubt. And then he was ruined,—so he thought. For the first moment he was stunned by the blow. Seven years! Half a man's life,—half of the brightest part of his life,—the flower and cream of his existence. By this time dreams had begun to steal into his heart unawares,—dreams half inarticulate of the life which his father's heir, the reigning Renton of Renton, would naturally lead, tinged with all tender regrets, and loyal to all memories, but still his own life, master of himself and his lands and of the position his forefathers had

made for him. It was not possible that he should be unaware that few young men in England would be better endowed, or have a better start in the world than he. Everything was open to him,—a political career, if he chose, the power of wealth, the thrill of independence, and all the hopes of happiness which move a young man. Even while these visions formed in his mind, they were struck by this sharp stroke of reality, and faded away. He grew pale; the muscles tightened round his mouth; a heavy damp came on his forehead. At one time the room reeled round with him,—a mist of pale eager faces, through which that monotonous voice rose. He was the foremost, and he did not see his brothers. He did not even think of them, it must be confessed. The blow was hardest to him, and he thought of himself.

When, however, the reading reached the point at which we have stopped, Mrs. Westbury, forgetting herself, rose up, and rushed to the boys, with a sudden burst of sobs. 'Forgive me!' she cried wildly. 'Oh, boys, forgive me! I will never, never forgive myself!'

At this interruption Mr. Pounceby stopped, and all the spectators turned round surprised. Then nature appeared in the three young men. Ben made a little imperative gesture with his hand. 'Aunt Lydia, you can have nothing to do with it,' he said; 'don't interrupt us. We must not detain our friends.' Laurie, for his part, took her hand, and drew it through his

arm. 'We can have nothing to forgive you,' he said, compassionately supporting her, having more insight than the rest. Frank, glad for his boyish part to be relieved from this tension of interest by any incident, went and fetched her a chair. 'Hush!' he said, as the sound of her sobbing died into a half-terrified stillness. And thus they heard it out to the end.

The interruption did them all good. It dispersed the haze of bewilderment that had gathered round the young men. The dust of the ruins falling round them might have blinded them but for this sudden call back to themselves. When all was over, Ben had so far recovered himself as to speak, though his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

'We are much obliged to you all for joining us to-day,' he said; 'I am sure you will excuse my mother, and indeed all of us. She is never very strong. Mr. Pounceby, I know you are anxious to get back to town.'

'But, Ben, my dear fellow,' said one of the party, stepping forward and grasping his hand, 'stop a little. It is not any want of respect to your excellent father, —but it must have been disease, you know. Such things happen every day. You will not accept this extraordinary rigmarole. He must have been out of his mind!'

'We are quite satisfied with my father's will; thanks,' said Ben proudly, though with a quiver of his lip, and he looked round for the first time at his

brothers. 'Quite satisfied,' said Laurie once more, with that look of compassion which seemed uncalled for at the moment, when he himself was one of the chief persons to be compassionated. 'Quite satisfied,' echoed Frank steadily, with wonder in his eyes. Then Mr. Pounceby interposed.

'Mr. Renton was of perfectly sound mind when he executed this document,' he said. 'I was with him nearly all day, and went through a great deal of business. I never saw him more clear and business-like. On that point nothing can be said.'

'Nothing must be said on any point,' said Ben quickly. 'My brothers and myself are satisfied. My father had a perfect right—— I would rather not enter into the subject. We are much obliged to our friends all the same.'

And thus all remark was peremptorily cut short. The neighbours dispersed, carrying all over the country the news of poor Renton's extraordinary will; of how much he must have lost his head; and that Ben and the other boys were Quixotic enough not to dispute it. It was monomania, people said; and everybody knew that monomaniacs were sound on all points but one. Before nightfall there had arisen a body of evidence to prove that Mr. Renton had long been mad on this subject. One man remembered something he had said on one occasion, and another man on a second. He had been mad about his family; and the boys must be mad, too, to bear it. These reports, how-

ever, did not break the stillness which had fallen on the Manor,—a stillness almost more blank than that of death. The sobs of two women, one weeping faintly over her boys' disappointment, the other wildly in self-reproach, were the only sounds that disturbed the calm of the house. The boys themselves were stunned, and for that day, at least, had not the heart to say a word.

CHAPTER III.

THE NEW CAREER.

It was twenty-four hours before the brothers met to consult over their darkened prospects. Their mother could kiss and weep over them, but she was not the kind of woman to direct or guide her boys. Such faint idea as she had in her mind was of a kind which would have entirely defeated their father's purpose. 'Never mind, my darling boy,' she had said soothingly to her eldest son, though he was already a bearded man, with the stern Renton lines of resolution about his mouth. The poor little woman knew no better than to console him as if he had lost a toy. 'We can go on living at Renton all the same. I shall only have you so much the longer. We shall only want a little more economy, my dear,' she said. 'Perhaps that was what your dear papa meant. He knew how lonely I would be. Why can't we all live together as we have done? I have enough for you all by my settlement, and I am to keep Renton; and when the seven years are past, it will be quite time enough to think of marrying. I should not be against you

travelling——or anything, Ben, my dear boy,' the poor mother added faltering, seeing the sternness on his face.

'No, mother dear,' said her son. 'No. What you have is for yourself. We shall all come to see you; but we are not such mean creatures as to live on you. Besides, that was not what he meant.'

'Then what did he mean?' said Mrs. Renton. 'Oh, boys, that I should be driven to blame your dear papa! What could he mean if it was not to keep you a little longer with me?'

'He meant to put us on our mettle,' said Laurie; 'and he was right. We would be a set of sad lazy fellows if we stayed on here. We'll come and see you, mamma, as Ben says. Don't cry. We none of us want to marry, thank heaven!—at least,' said Laurie, thoughtfully, 'I hope so; that complication is spared at least.'

'Dear boys, it is so much better you should not marry too soon,' said Mrs. Renton, drying her soft eyes. 'He must have been thinking of that. Oh, believe me, Ben, my own boy, it will turn out all for the best.'

'Yes, mother,' said Ben, with the sigh of submission perforce, and he went away with his own thoughts; Laurie followed him after a little interval; and Frank, upon whom the shock had fallen more lightly, stayed with his mother to amuse and cheer her. But they all met in the library in the afternoon

to have a consultation over their fate. They were brothers in misfortune,—a bond almost as strong as that of nature. It hurt their pride to go over the ground with any other creature, even their mother, who could not refrain from a hundred suggestions as to their father's meaning. But among themselves they were safe, and could speak freely, with the consciousness of having the same meaning, the same impulse, the same pride. They never discussed the will, but accepted it proudly, owing it to themselves, as their father's sons, to make no question. Already their hearts had risen a little from the blank depression of the previous night. It was Frank who was the first to speak.

'I tell you what I shall do,' he said with the rapid decision of youth. Frank had never been thought clever, though he was reasonable and high-spirited; and, consequently, the decision to him was a less complicated business. 'I shall exchange into the line, and go to India if I can. More fun,' said the young soldier, trying hard for his old gaiety, though there was still the gleam of a tear in his eye, 'and better pay.'

'Well, that is easily settled,' said Laurie; 'and I think very sensible too. Only one thing we ought to think of. Whatever the others may decide upon, let one of us always be at hand for the sake of my poor mother. He always took such care of her. She wants

to have one of us to refer to. We might take it in turns, you know—'

'All right,' said Frank, to whom, if he carried out his own plan, such a turn would be simply impossible; but the boy did not think of that. As for Ben, he was very hard at work considering his own problem, and knitting his brows.

'We are like the three princes in the fairy tales,' said Laurie, 'sent out to find,—what?—a shawl that will pass through a ring, or a little dog in a nutshell. That was to decide which should reign, though. I hope our probation does not include so much.'

'I have made up my mind it does,' said Ben, with a darker contraction of his brows; 'it would be unmeaning else. When the seven years are over we shall be judged according to our works. It's rather a startling realisation, you know.'

'Old fellow,' said Laurie hastily, 'of course I stand up for my father's will through thick and thin; but, will or no will, you know Frank and me too well to think either of us would ever take your place.'

'I should hope so,' said young Frank, leaning half over the table in his eagerness. 'Ben can't think us such cads as that.'

'I don't think you cads,' said Ben; 'but I shall stand by the will, whatever it is. I'll fight for my birthright, of course; but since we are placed in this

position, Laurie, it's of no use talking. He that wins must have. I shall stand by that.'

'Well,' said Laurence, 'it is easy to tell which is most like to win; so we need not dispute about it beforehand. The thing in the meantime is,—what to do? I wonder how the fellow set to work who had the ten talents. As for me, I am the unlucky soul with one. You need not say psha! so impatiently. We have got into the midst of the parables, and may as well take example——'

'The question is,' said Ben, 'not what we have got into the midst of, but what you mean to do?'

Laurie shrugged his shoulders. 'It is a great deal easier to talk than to do anything else,' he said, 'for me at least. I suppose I must take to art. You need not tell me I have no genius,' he added, with a slight flush. 'I know that well enough. But what else can I take to? Moralising is not a trade; or at least if it is, it's overstocked; and I can't moralise on paper. I must go in for illustrations and that sort of thing. Undignified, perhaps, but how can I help it? There is nothing else I can do.'

'A fellow with a university education, and as good blood in his veins as any in England,' said Ben, with a little impatience, 'might surely do better than that.'

'What good will my blood do me?' said Laurie. 'Get me a few invitations, perhaps. And as for a university education,—I might take pupils, if I had not forgotten most of what I've learned; or I might

take orders; or I might go and eat my terms at the Temple. And what would any of these three things do for me? Fellows that have meant it all their lives would, of course, do better than a fellow who never meant it till now. No; I have a little taste for art, if I have not much talent. I might turn picture-dealer, perhaps. Don't look so black, Ben. A man must make use of what faculty he has.'

After that there was a pause, for Laurie did not care to put the same inquiry which he had just answered, to his elder brother. And Ben did not volunteer any information about the part he meant to take. Ben could not evaporate in talk, as Laurie could. He could not make up his mind to his fate, and adapt himself to circumstances. Though his pride had forbidden him any struggle against his father's will, yet in his heart he was embittered against his father. There was injustice in it. Of course, he repeated to himself, fellows who had meant it all their lives must do better than fellows who only began to mean it in necessity. Laurie was right so far. And under this frightful disadvantage their father, of his own will, had placed them. Frank had a profession, and might be not much the worse. But Ben himself had been brought up to be heir of Renton. His heart grew hard within him as he thought it all over. It seemed to him that if he had known it from the beginning he would not have cared. He would have gone in for anything,—what

did it matter?—professional work, or trade, or anything, so long as he started fair, and had the same advantages as his neighbours. Now he must thrust himself into something which was already full of legitimate competitors. He sat and looked into the flame of the lamp, and took no notice of his brothers. But their fate added an aggravation to his own. Frank was not so bad; it made less difference to Frank than to any of them. An officer in a marching regiment was as good a gentleman as a Guardsman. But Laurie a poor artist, and himself he could not tell what! The thought galled him to the heart.

'And, Ben, what shall you do?' said Frank. 'We have told you, and you ought to tell us. I don't suppose you mean to stay on with mamma. What shall you do?'

'I don't know,' said Ben, with a sudden descent into the depths of despondency. He had almost wept as he spoke. One had his profession, the other at least a taste, if nothing more. Poor Ben, the first-born, had no speciality. He might have been a political man, with a hand in the government of his country, or he might have been a farmer, or he might have gone to Calcutta, as Dick Westbury had done; whereas, now, at five-and-twenty, he could not tell what to do.

'Never mind, you'll do the best of us all;—you were always the cleverest of us all,' said Frank, shocked at his brother's dejected looks; and then it

flashed across them what their father had said, that it would be most hard upon Ben.

'It is you who have the ten talents,' said Laurie, 'and Frank has the five; and you will go away one to your farm, and the other to your merchandise,—isn't that how the story runs?—while I am left with one in my napkin. Or, if that is too serious for you, let's take it on the other side. But whatever you do, beware of the old woman whom we are all sure to meet as we set out, who will ask us to help her, and give us three gifts. I shall keep a very sharp look out for that old woman,' said Laurie, breaking the spell of stillness, and getting up. 'Laugh at it? Yes, I am trying to laugh a little. Would you rather I should cry?' he said, turning upon his brother, with tears glistening in his eyes. It was a question which it would be. They were all at this point, standing upon the alternative, between such poor laughter as might be possible and bitter tears.

All this sad and wonderful overthrow had come from Mrs. Westbury's indiscreet taunts to her brother upon the up-bringing of his sons. If that could have been any comfort to them, their Aunt Lydia was very miserable. They had never allowed her to finish her confession, and her heart was very sore over the injustice that had been done them. That same night she stole to Ben's door, and would have wept over him had that been possible. She was not an unkind or hard-hearted woman. It had

been a kind of pleasure to her to contrast her nephews' idleness with the Renton traditions; but she was a true Renton, strong in her sense of justice, and there was nothing she would not have done for them now.

'Ben, let me speak to you,' she said. 'I did not mean it,—far from that, heaven knows! I wish my tongue had been cut out first. I know it would go against you to admit such a thing if any one else said it; but, Ben, your father could not have been in his right senses. He never could have done it, if he had known.'

'It is a question I can't discuss with you, Aunt Lydia,' said Ben, standing at the open door and barring her entrance. 'I think you are mistaken. I don't think it could be anything you said.'

'Ben, I know it!' said Mrs. Westbury. 'I could not be mistaken. Let me come in, and I will tell you. It was done on Friday, and that unfortunate conversation was on Thursday night. He was very snappish to poor Laurie when we went back to the lawn;—but, oh, if I could have known what was to follow it! Ben, I must come in and speak to you; I have a great deal to say. You know, there is our Dick——'

'Yes,' said Ben. He had to let her in, though he did it with an ill grace. He placed his easy-chair for her, and stood leaning against the table, to hear what she had to say. He would not countenance or encourage her to remain by sitting down, but

stood with his candle in his hand, a most unwilling host.

'You are angry with me,' said Aunt Lydia, 'and you have reason. But what I want to say is about Dick. If your father had made this move at the right time, it is you who should have gone to Calcutta, Ben. You have the best right. My boy only went, as it were, to fill your place; and he ought to give it up to you now. Of course it was to my brother he owed the appointment. I don't say Dick should come home; but he has made some money and some friends; and, I think he might do something for himself still, in another way, instead of taking your place.'

'It is nonsense to call it my place,' said Ben.

'I don't think it is nonsense; for my part, I think of justice,' said Mrs. Westbury. 'It would have been yours had you been sent off six or seven years ago, as you ought to have been. Yes, I say as you ought to have been, Ben, like all the Rentons. None of us were ever fine gentlemen. The men always worked before they took their ease, and the women always managed and saved in our house; but you should not be turned out now, when you were not brought up to it. Ben, my brother was very cross to me that Thursday night. It was not him, poor fellow, it was illness that was working on him. He was not in his right mind; and the will ought to be broken.'

'I can't have you say this,' said Ben. 'I can't let anybody say it. Aunt Lydia, we had better not discuss the question. We have all made up our minds to my father's will, such as it is.'

'Then you are very foolish boys,' said Mrs. Westbury; 'when I, who would stand up for him in reason or out of reason, tell you so! Your father's good name is of as much consequence to me as it is to you. There never was a Renton like that before; but still if it was to stand in the way of justice——! And about Dick. You ought to write to him at once, to tell him he is to look out for something else for himself, and that you mean to take your own place.'

'I shall never go to Calcutta,' said Ben shortly.

'Then what will you do?' said his aunt. 'You can't live on two hundred a-year,—at least you were never meant to live on it,—you know that. And you can't live on your mother. Unless you are going out to India what are you to do?'

'I shall find something to do,' said Ben briefly; and then he softened a little. 'I know you mean to be kind,' he said. 'I am sure you always meant to be kind; but I can't do any of the things you propose. I can neither question my father's will, nor live on my mother, nor turn out Dick. Let him make the best of it. I should think he had got the worst over now. And don't blame yourself. I don't think you were to blame. There must have been

some foundation to work on in my father's thoughts; and it is done; and I will never try to undo it. We must all make the best of it now. Will you do one thing to please me, Aunt Lydia? Let Mary be with my mother as much as you can spare her. She will feel it when we are all gone.'

'I will do anything you please,' said Mrs. Westbury, melted to tears. 'Oh, to think I should have done you so much harm, and be so powerless to do you any good! But, Ben, you have not told me what you are going to do?'

'Because I don't know,' said Ben abruptly. He could not come to any decision. His aunt left him reluctantly when they had reached this point, thinking, notwithstanding her compunction, or perhaps in consequence of it, that if his petition about Mary meant any special regard for her, she would not hesitate to give him her child. 'He will make his way,' she said to herself; 'he will make his way.' It was because he was a little hard and stern in his downfall that she thought so well of him; and her feelings were very different as she went prowling through the passages in her dressing-gown to knock at Laurie's door. Poor Laurie! nobody entertained any such confidence about him.

When Mrs. Westbury paused at Laurie's door he was seated with his head buried in his hands before his table, on which lay the ruins, so to speak, of various youthful hopes. Though he had said so con-

fidently that none of them wanted to marry, yet there were one or two notes on the table before him, in a woman's hand, which he had been looking over, poor boy, with a certain tightening of his heart. And there were hopes too of another kind; plans for travel, plans for such study as suited his mind, which it had been his delight to form for some time past, and which he had so little doubt of persuading his father to let him carry out. His little maps and calculations lay before him, all huddled together. That chapter of his life was over. He could smile at the change when they were all together, to help the others to bear it; but grief, and disappointment, and downfall, all fell upon him with additional force when he was alone. His eyes were wet when he sprang up at Aunt Lydia's summons, and shouted a 'Come in,' which was as cheerful as he could make it, sweeping his papers away as he did so into the open drawer of his table. He thought it was one of his brothers, perhaps Ben, come to get some comfort from his lighter heart. When Mrs. Westbury came in he was taken aback, poor fellow; but Laurie was too tender-hearted to be anything but kind to his aunt. He cast down a heap of books, which were occupying the most comfortable seat in the room, and made a place for her, glad to turn away his face for the moment and conceal the tears in his eyes; but those tears would not be concealed. They kept springing up again, though he kept them from falling;

and though he smiled, and began cheerfully, 'Well, Aunt Lydia?' there was a sufficiently melancholy tone in both voice and face.

'We shall be going away to-morrow, Laurie,' said Mrs. Westbury, 'and I could not go without speaking to you. Oh, what a week this has been! When I think that it was only last Thursday night——'

'Don't speak of it, please,' said Laurie; 'one has need of all one's strength. It is bad enough, but we must make the best of it. I wish you were not going away. I thought Mary would stay with my mother. How is she to get on when we are all gone?'

'I might leave Mary for a little,' said Mrs. Westbury, doubtfully; 'and then we shall be close by at the Cottage, where your mother can send for us when she pleases. Ah, Laurie, if you had only had a sister of your own!'

'If we had only had a great many things!' said Laurie, with an attempt at a smile; 'but, as for that, Mary is as good as a sister. I never knew the difference. I think she is the best creature in the world.'

'Yes,' said Aunt Lydia, looking at him keenly, with an inspection very different from her manner to Ben; 'she is a good girl; but you always used to quarrel, Laurie. I did not think she was so much to you.'

'She always thought me a good-for-nothing fellow,' said Laurie, with a little laugh, 'like most other peo-

ple. I must show you now, if I can, that I've got some mettle in me. But, Aunt Lydia, you have not come to say good-bye?'

'No,' said Mrs. Westbury; and then she made a pause. 'I can't rest, Laurie; I can't keep quiet and see you all in trouble,—when it is my fault!'

'That is nonsense,' said Laurence decidedly. 'You may be quite sure it had been turning over in his mind for some time; and quite right, too,' the young man added bravely. 'How could we ever have known what stuff we were made of else? If there is any good in being a Renton, as you have so often told us, now is the time for it to show.'

'Oh, Laurie,' said his aunt, weeping, 'that is what breaks my heart. 'You have not a chance now, with the up-bringing you have had, and your poor mother's soft ways,—not a chance! If my brother had only thought in time. This will could never stand if it was brought into a court of justice. He could not be in his right mind. Ben would not listen to me when I said so; but I must speak to you.'

'You shall speak to me as much as you like,' said Laurie, with his mother's soft ways, 'but not on that subject. It is sacred for us, whatever other people may think. And, after all, you know,' he said, with a smile, 'it is but for seven years. I shall only be about thirty at the end of the trial;—quite a boy!'

'Quite a boy!' said Aunt Lydia, very seriously; 'but still I can't bear it. And, Laurie, though you

are the least like a Renton of any of them, I have always been the fondest of you!'

'Thanks, dear aunt,' said the young man, and he kissed her, and led her half resisting to her own room. 'All this excitement and want of rest will upset you,' he said to her tenderly; 'and, Aunt Lydia, don't say anything to Frank.'

Laurie went back to his musings and his papers when she had made him this promise;—and Mrs. Westbury had a good cry over the whole miserable business. 'Upset me!' she said to herself, 'as if I was a woman like his mother to be upset! Oh, if I could but do anything for these poor boys!'

But at the same time she was glad in her heart that Laurie thought of Mary only as his sister. A mother has to consider everything; and that could never have been,—though it was a different thing with Ben.

These preliminaries being told, and the singular and unexpected nature of this family crisis fully explained, the historian of the Renton family feels justified in proceeding with this narrative of the fortunes of the three boys, and their adventures in the big changed world, upon which they were launched so abruptly. They all left the Manor together on a sultry September day, just the day on which, under other circumstances, they would have been off to shoot grouse or to climb Mont Blanc. Their mourning prevented such invitations as even in their changed fortune they would

certainly have received, and the shock was so fresh on all of them that pleasure-making of any kind would have been impossible. They went out as if they had been put to sea, each man in his own bark, with no very sure compass or chart to rely on, and with minds braced high by resolution, but altogether unprepared for the trial, and unaccustomed to the labour. Perhaps it was as as well for them that their ideas were so utterly vague and undefined touching the rocks and shoals and dangerous passages that lay in their way.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ELDEST SON.

The young men separated when they left the Manor, —one to his farm, and another to his merchandise, as Laurie said. It is our business at the present moment to follow only the eldest. Ben went back to his chambers in the Albany, his personal head-quarters, though he did not occupy them for more than three months in the year. Though he was called Ben, his name was the solemn family name of Benedict. It suited him better than the contraction. He was one of those men who are in the way of taking things very much in earnest,—too much in earnest, some people thought. The fashion of the period had accustomed him to the light outward appearance and pretence of general indifference common to his kind; but in his heart he was not indifferent to anything. He had felt his advantages keenly, taking all the more anxious care that no one should suspect him of doing so; and he felt his downfall now, to the bottom of his heart. He went back to London, which seemed the only place to go to in the emer-

gency. He had been on a pleasant visit at a pleasant house when the call came to his father's death-bed. Now, in September, when he had not a friend remaining in town, he took his solitary way there, and went to the handsome, forlorn rooms, the very rent of which would now have swallowed up so great a part of his income. He went in listlessly, amid all the tokens of his former life, almost hating the signs of a luxury so far beyond his means. Ben had taste as well as Laurie, though in a different way. His chambers were furnished daintily, as became a man accustomed to spend as he pleased and spare nothing. It had always been a comfort to Mr. Renton's practical eye, that his son's knick-knacks were all knick-knacks of a thoroughly saleable kind,—things which had a real value; and the same thought, as he entered, brought a smile upon Ben's face. 'I shall make some money out of the d——d trash,' he said to himself bitterly, thrusting away with his foot a little graceful guéridon, on which stood a Sèvres déjeûner service. The toy tottered, and would have fallen, but that he put out his hand by instinct to save it. Then,—if the reader will not despise him for it, —it must be allowed that Ben sank down into a chair, and did something equivalent to what a woman would have done had she cried. He muttered ill things of himself under his breath,—he called himself a confounded fool to risk by his ill-temper anything that might bring him the money he stood so much in

need of,—and then he covered his eyes with his hands, and felt a sudden contraction in his throat. He had nobody to appeal to, nobody to consult. He had the problem of life to resolve for himself as he best could, and he had lost a father whom he loved, not a week before. All these thoughts came over him as he went into his old rooms, where all his favourite possessions were. Of course, neither the rooms nor their ornaments could be retained. All that Ben could pretend to now was of a much humbler description; but he would not hand over to another even the pain of putting things in order, and making ready for the final sacrifice. His servant would have to be given up too. He had not the means of hiring help to do anything that he could do for himself. Henceforward he would have to learn to do things for himself, and here was the first thing to do.

It is true that he would have given up these same rooms without a pang for various other reasons;—had he been going to take possession of the house in Berkeley Square, which now, he supposed, would either be let or shut up;—had he been going abroad, or, indeed, for almost any other reasonable cause;—just as the people would do who break their hearts over the hall, or rectory, or deceased father's house, which they would have abandoned joyfully a dozen times in as many years, had a pleasant chance come in their way. It was the wreck of circumstance surrounding this change which wounded Ben; the

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breaking up of all his habits, and failure of everything he had been used to. When he had recovered himself a little, he took a disconsolate stroll through the rooms, and reckoned up what his things had cost him; — his pictures, — some of which were copies picked up abroad, and some chef-d'œuvres of young artists at home, which Laurie had persuaded him to give good prices for;—the cabinets he had attained after unexampled efforts at Lady Bertram's sale,— his choice little collection of old Dresden,—even his pipes and his whips, and a hundred other trifles, which, when he counted them up, had cost heaps of money. Some of them, alas! were not even paid for, which was the worst sting of all. Ben had been in debt before now, and cared little enough, perhaps too little for it. He had felt the weight of wealth behind him, and that he could pay his arrears without much difficulty when he chose to make the effort. But now everything was changed. It is only when debt becomes a necessity that it is a burden. He felt it now, dragging him down, as it were staring into his face, hemming him in. Debt for bits of china, and pretty follies of furniture! And now, for aught he could tell, he might not have enough for daily bread. To be sure, a man could not starve upon two hundred a-year; but there are such different ways of starving. And his whole first year's income would not be nearly enough to pay off his rent, and his man, and the expenses of the break-up, not to speak of tradesmen.

Such reflections were so novel to him that he sat down again in despair, with his brain going round and round. He did not even know how to set about being ruined. There was nobody in town likely to buy his pretty things at this time of the year, or to take his rooms off his hands. He had come up fully resolved to be sufficient to himself, to manage everything himself, and to give no one the opportunity of pity or remark. But it was less easy than he supposed. As for his servant, he had been with him at the Manor, and had heard, or found out, or divined, as servants do, something of what had happened, and was not unprepared for dismissal. 'Yes, sir,' he said, without hesitation, when his master spoke to him. 'I hope it's not that I don't give satisfaction, sir: I've always done my best.'

'No, no,' said Ben, with a young man's unnecessary explanatoriness. 'I can't afford now to keep anybody but myself. I am very sorry. It is not that I have any objection to you.'

'Yes, sir,' said the man once more. 'Of course it's understood that there's board-wages, sir, if I'm sent away in a hurry before the end of the month?'

'Have what you like,' said Ben, with a little indignation; 'if that's all; give me a note exactly of what's owing to you, and you can take yourself off as soon as you like.'

'Yes, sir; but it looks pecooliar being sent away so sudden,' said the fellow standing his ground.

'Perhaps you would not mind just giving a bit of an explanation to any gentleman as may come about my character. I hope you consider I deserve a good character, sir. Gentlemen, and 'specially ladies, is very apt to ask, "How was it as you was turned away?"'

'You may go now,' said Ben, coldly. 'I have nothing more to say to you. I'll give you your money as soon as you're ready to go.'

'But my character, sir?' insisted the man. Ben, in his wrath, seized his hat and went off, leaving Morris holding the door open with these words on his lips. He was unreasonably angry in spite of his better judgment. The very first man he had spoken to after his downfall was so entirely indifferent to his concerns, so wrapped up in his own! What were Morris's board-wages or miserable character in comparison to Ben's overthrow and changed existence? He went out angry—in a passion, as Morris said not without reason. Naturally the man had his own theory of the whole matter, and held it for certain that his master had been going to the bad, or why should his father disinherit him?—to which question, indeed, it was difficult to make any answer. Ben's next errand was to a fashionable auctioneer and house-agent, who was very civil, and yet very different from what he had been when the young man of fashion took his rooms. 'Going abroad, sir?' Mr. Robins said, with a certain scrutiny which

made the young fellow, for the first time in his life, feel himself a doubtful character, required to give an account of himself.

'Perhaps. I can't say,' he answered; 'but these rooms have become too expensive for me, anyhow, and I want to sell my things.'

'The worst possible time to do it,' said the auctioneer, shaking his head. 'There is not a soul in town, sir, as you know as well as I do. Even in our humble way, we are going to the country ourselves. They would not fetch a third of their proper price now.'

'But I want the money,' said Ben; 'and I can't keep up the place. I must get rid of them now.'

'I can take your orders, of course, sir,' said Mr. Robins, deprecatingly; 'but it will be at a frightful sacrifice. Nobody but dealers will look at them now, —and we all know what dealers are. Buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest,— a fine maxim, sir, for trade; but ruinous for fancy articles, when you have to push them to a sale, and there's nobody to buy.'

'I can't help myself,' said Ben, abruptly. He had almost said, 'What would you advise me to do?' But his mind was in such a restless state, that the pendulum had veered back again to its first throb of obstinacy ere he could say the other words. And the orders were taken accordingly. Then he went to his club with the listlessness of a man who does not

know what to do. What was he to do? Supposing he could make his club his home, with a bedroom somewhere to sleep in, and the Manor and his friends to fall back upon—would that do? Probably he could manage it, even on his small income, by dint of economy,—that unknown quality to which ignorance gave a certain appearance of facility. With no servant, no expensive habits, no entertainment of friends, he might be able to manage. This was what some one of his spiritual enemies whispered in Ben's ear. The next moment he jumped up and began to walk about the long vacant room,—of which at the moment he was the sole occupant,—with sudden agitation. His idle, pleasant life had come natural to him in the past; but already, though so little time had elapsed, it was no longer natural. To spend seven years of his existence planning how to save shillings and keep up appearances,—to live, he a young man at the height of his strength and powers, the life of a genteel old maid! That was impossible. A day-labourer would be better, he said to himself. But it is so easy to say that. He knew well enough that he could not be a day-labourer; and what could he be?

He had come thus far in his uncomfortable thoughts when somebody struck him familiarly on the shoulder, with an exclamation of surprise. 'You here!' said the new-comer. 'You in London when there is nobody in it, Ben Renton! You are the last fellow I expected to see.'

'What, Hillyard!' said Ben, though his cordiality was languid in comparison. 'Back so soon? Have you made your fortune already?' And as he spoke it occurred to him that going to Australia must be the thing to do.

'Not much of that,' said his friend, who was very brown and very hairy, and in clothes that would not bear examination. 'That is easier said than done. I have spent all I had, which comes to about the same thing; and now I've come back to try my luck at home,—my ill-luck, I should say.'

'Then it is no good going to Australia,' was the thought that passed, rapid as the light, through Ben's mind. 'But I thought all sorts of people made fortunes at the diggings, or in the bush, or whatever you call it,' was what he said.

'Yes, that's how one deceives one's self,' said the adventurer. 'One throws everything together in a lump, and one thinks it's all right; whereas it's all wrong, you know. If I had been brought up to be a shepherd, I might have got on in the bush; and if I had been brought up a bricklayer's labourer, I might have succeeded at the diggings; but I was not, you see. And even in these elevated branches of industry the requirements are quite different. Let us have some dinner, Renton. It's great luck to find any one to hob-and-nob with, especially such a fellow as you.'

'Dinner!' said Ben amazed, looking at his watch. 'Why, it's only three o'clock.'

Upon which Mr. Hillyard burst into a great laugh. 'I forgot I was back in civilisation,' he said; 'but I must have something to eat, whatever you call it. Yes, here I am, no better than when I went away. I believe it's all luck, after all. Some fellows get on like a house on fire. Some are thankful for bread and cheese all their lives. Some, if they work themselves sick, don't get that. What's the good of making one's self miserable?—it's all fate.'

'I suppose one must live, however, in spite of fate,' said Ben, not caring much what were the first words that came to his lips, nor with any positive meaning in what he said.

'Oh, I never was one of your tragical heroes,' said Hillyard; 'better luck next time is always my motto; though, mind you, I'm not so sure that one is bound to live in spite of everything. I don't see the necessity. If there's anything better to go to, why shouldn't one have a try for it? And if there isn't, what does it matter? It's a man's own responsibility. If he likes to face it, let him, and don't abuse the poor devil as if he were a pickpocket. Why, there was a fellow the other day,—and, by the way, I am taking his things home to his mother, which is a nice commission,—who squared off his fate with a bullet, by my side. I must say, I can't blame him for one. Things could not well be worse up there,' said this savage philosopher, waving his hand vaguely towards the roof, 'than they were down below. But

this is a queer sort of talk when one has just come home, and to a favourite of fortune like you.'

'I am not much of a favourite of fortune just now,' said Ben, with a certain longing for human sympathy. 'But I'll tell you about that afterwards. Now you have come home, are you going to stay in town, or what do you mean to do?'

The question was asked not quite in good faith, for it glided vaguely across Ben's mind that the plans of a man who had long lived on his wits might suggest something for his own aid; and the answer was not more ingenuous, for it naturally occurred to Hillyard that his friend, who had the liberal hospitality of a great country-house to fall back on, and the probability of a shooting-box somewhere of his own, might intend to offer him an invitation, and so bridge over some portion of those autumn months, which were of so little use to a man who is looking for something to do.

'I shall get along, I suppose, in the old way,' he said, shrugging his shoulders. 'I'll serve up my Australian experiences for the papers, perhaps; or do them philosophically, with all their chances and dangers for intending emigrants, for the "Monthly," if I can get hold of Rathbone; or go in as a coach. I flatter myself I could give the Colonial Secretary a hint or two if I could get at him. A little tall talk hurts no one. The fact is, I don't know what I am going to be about,' he added with a sigh. 'Living on

one's wits is hard work enough. I have kept up nothing of old days except the club, which is always a kind of haven; though, I daresay, that sounds strange to you.'

'Not now,' said Ben, with a contraction in his throat. 'I am as poor as you, and more helpless. I rather think I am good for nothing. I suppose I shall get used to it in time, but it's not a pleasant feeling as yet.' And then he told his companion all with a curious effusion, which did not surprise Hillyard more than it did himself. He had resolved to say nothing to anyone,—to lock up his troubles in his own breast, and seek no advice even from his oldest friends; and here he was unbosoming himself to the first-comer,—a man whom he had not seen for two years, and who was by no means one of his close friends. He was not aware, poor fellow, what necessity of nature it was that moved him. He justified himself afterwards by the reflection that Hillyard was, so to speak, a stranger and safe confidant,—that there was nobody in town to whom he could repeat it,—that he was a brother in misfortune, shifty and full of expedients, and might help him. But all these were after-thoughts. His real impulse was the mere instinct of nature to relieve himself from the secret pressure of a burden which was more than his unaccustomed shoulders could bear.

Hillyard was much amazed and mystified by the

strange tale, and could with difficulty be brought to believe it. But he was very sympathetic and consolatory when his first incredulity was got over. 'After all, it's only for seven years,' he said; 'that is not so very much in a life. If I knew I should come into a good estate at forty,—ay, or at fifty,—I shouldn't mind the struggle now; and you will be only a little over thirty. It's nothing,—it's absolutely nothing. You're down just now, and taken by surprise, and out of spirits with what's happened, and all that. But things will look better presently. You think it's hard to struggle and work, and never know where you're to get to-morrow's dinner,' said the adventurer, with a certain light kindling in his eyes; 'but sometimes it gives a wonderful relish to life. You enjoy the dinner all the better. It's more exciting than fox-hunting, or even elephant-hunting; and what does a fellow want in life but lots of excitement and movement and stir? As long,' he added, after a pause, 'as your strength lasts, and your mind, and your spirit, it is all very well. I don't care for tame well-being, with no risks in it. It will be nothing but fun for you.'

'I don't see the fun,' said Ben; but certainly the dark clouds over him were moved by the suggestion. 'And I have not your knowledge or resources. Absolutely, if you'll believe me, I have not an idea what to do.'

'So I should think,' said Hillyard. 'It would be odd if you had, plunged into it like this, without a moment's notice. Lie on your oars, my dear fellow, for a day or two, and come about with me. We may hit on something, you know; and, at all events, a few days' waiting can do you no harm.'

By this time his meal had been served to him, and its arrival interrupted the talk. Ben rose and walked away to a distant window, already feeling some qualms of self-disgust at what he had done. As he stood looking out upon the flood of human beings, each absorbed in his own interests, he felt, perhaps for the first time in his life, how utterly unimportant to the world was his individual comfort, or that of any one mortal creature. He was no more to the crowd, not so much, as one drop of perfume or of bitterness would be to the pleasant Thames as it floated past his father's house,—not near so much. The sea would be a juster emblem,—that sea which swallowed up rivers and showed no increase, which threw forth its lavish atoms to the air and knew no diminution. He had been an important personage up to this moment, even in his own opinion, though he had always known theoretically the insignificance of the individual. But he knew it now with a certainty beyond theory. When Hillyard and he were driven against the rocks, who would know the difference or be any the wiser? He who a month ago would have compassionately

taken Hillyard home with him, to give him a little time to consider, was now, under the adventurer's guidance, a more hopeless adventurer than Hillyard. Ben's thoughts were not pleasant as he stood and looked out, watching the stream,—deep, no doubt, with human passion, sorrow, and perplexity, but so inexpressive on the surface,—which kept flowing on like water, as perennial and unbroken. His own life flitted before him like a dream as he stood looking out,—so useless, and luxurious, and free; so care-laden and overwhelmed by storms; so vague and doubtful in the future. Had he even known what would await him in the end his fate would have been less hard. Perhaps his very efforts to work out the time of his probation might secure the loss of his birthright. He might find that he worked the wrong way, that he had missed the end, even after his best exertions. A funeral procession was making its way at the moment up the busy street, to which it gave so strange a moral. And Ben turned away his head and sat down, sickened by the sight of the slow hearse with its waving plumes. To think he should have been defrauded even of his natural grief, even of the softening of his heart, which should have come over his father's grave! Was the inmate of that other coffin leaving a wrong behind him, casting a stone with his dead hands to crush his children? This, no doubt, was a harsh way of taking his trouble; but

there are men to whom all crosses come harshly, and Ben Renton was one of them. Hillyard, satisfied and comfortable, with a slight flush of bodily well-being on his face, came up to him as he mused, with a glass of sherry in his hand.

'Not bad wine,' he said, with a sigh of comfort, 'and not a bad dinner, I can tell you, to a man fresh from the backwoods. Ben, I've got a wretched thing to do, and I want you to go with me. You're out of spirits, at any rate, and it will do you no harm.'

'What is it?' said Ben.

'I am going to see the mother of the poor fellow I told you of. She's a widow living somewhere about Manchester Square. I rather think he was the only son. He made a mull of it at some of those confounded examinations, and rushed out to Australia in despair; and all went wrong with him there, and he squared it off, as I told you. I have to take her some of his things. You look more like the kind of thing, with your black clothes and your grave face, than I do. Stand by me, Ben, and I'll stand by you.'

'As you please,' said Ben, languidly. Already the familiarity of his new-old friend jarred on him a little. But he did not care what he did at that moment; he did not much care even what became of him. He had nothing to do and nobody to see. It was as easy to go to Manchester Square as anywhere else, though the locality was not delectable. He suf-

fered Hillyard to take his arm and draw him along, without much interest one way or a[illegible]her, not seeing how his compliance with such a trifling request could particularly affect even the hour of time which it occupied, much less his character or his life.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAGICIAN'S CAVE.

THE address was Guildford Street, Manchester Square, a narrow, dingy, very respectable street, with a good many public-houses in it, and livery stables under three or four different archways, where the genteel population round about got their 'flys.' The houses were tall and rather decayed, with smoky remains of the flowers which had been kept fresh and bright in the season lingering in their narrow little balconies, and no small amount of cards hung up in the windows announcing lodgings to let. It occurred to Ben as he walked listlessly through it that here was a place which would be more suitable to his fallen fortunes than the Albany; but the thought was inarticulate, and took no form. There was even a similar ticket in the ground-floor window of No. 10, where Mrs. Tracy lived, and where they were immediately admitted and conducted to the drawing-room. Ben followed his friend mechanically into the dingy room, with three long windows glimmering down to the faded carpet, commanding a view of the opposite

livery stable, from which one inevitable fly was creeping slowly out under the archway. This particular vehicle was drawn by an old white horse, and it was that spot of white upon the dim foreground, and the white cotton gloves of the driver, that caught Ben's eye as he went in. He was so little interested that he scarcely noticed anything in the room. It was a disagreeable business. He had come listlessly because he had been asked. But though he had heard the story of the widow's son it had not touched him. Perhaps he was not very tender-hearted by nature; perhaps it was because he was absorbed in his own affairs. But certainly when he saw a tall figure in black rise from the small room behind and make a step forward to meet his friend, Ben woke up with a little start to realise the fact that he was thrusting himself in, without any call, to be a spectator of what might be a tragical scene. He stopped short and grew red with the embarrassment of a well-bred man suddenly placed in a position where he is one too many; and, notwithstanding Hillyard's almost nervous glance back at him and appeal for support, might have made his way out again had not his course been suddenly arrested by another figure in intense mourning, which rose from a low seat by the vacant window. It was getting late in the afternoon, and twilight begins soon in a narrow London street; besides which the blinds were half down, the curtains hanging over the long

narrow windows, and such light as there was falling on the floor. For this reason the lady at the window had been seated on a very low chair against the wall, to secure all the light she could for the work in her hand. She rose up facing Ben as the other faced his friend, rising slowly from the long sweep of black drapery which had lain coiled round her on the carpet, and suddenly flashing upon the young man, out of the shadows, with such a face as he had never in all his life seen before. She gave him a hurried glance from head to foot, taking in every detail of his appearance, and settling in a second what manner of man he was; and then she pointed to a chair, with a soft murmur of invitation to him to seat himself. He obeyed her, not knowing why. His brain began to whirl. The long window bound with its high, narrow, smoky rail of balcony; the faded curtains hanging over and darkening the room; the pale light below upon the carpet, and the figure which sank slowly down once more with its black dress in waves on the floor; the white hands joined with some white work between them; the face against that dusky background,—was it true that he had never seen them all till that moment, or had they been there waiting for him, attending this moment all his life?

Ben Renton had been a great deal in society, and had seen beautiful women in his day; and he knew quantities of pretty girls, and had fancied himself a

little in love with some of them also in his time. But something, perhaps, in the surrounding made this woman different from anything he had ever seen. She was very tall, almost as tall as himself. She was pale, with none of that adventitious charm of colour which often stands in the place of beauty. Her hair was dark, without any gleams in it. The only colour about her was in her eyes, which were blue, like a winter sky,—blue of the sweetest and purest tone, shining out under her dark hair from her pale, beautiful face, from the shadow and the darkness, like a bit of heaven itself. Ben sat down and looked at her, struck dumb, in a kind of stupor. What had he to do with this wonderfully beautiful, silent creature? Who was she? How came she here? How did it come about that he sat by her, having no right to such an acquaintance, struck dumb, like a man in a dream? He looked on stupidly, and saw the other lady sink down and cover her face with her hands as Hillyard delivered his melancholy commission. Of course it was Hillyard's duty to do so, and even to remain with them while the daughter rose noiselessly and went to her mother, bending over her, turning her beautiful pale face appealingly to the strangers, with the blue eyes full of tears. With all this strange scene his companion had a certain connexion by right of his errand; but why was Ben Renton there, or what could it ever be to him?

And yet she came back to the seat by the window, and Ben, looking on, saw the tears fall upon her white hands and white work, and met in his turn the same wistful look. 'Were you there too?' she said with a little sob. He was ashamed of himself to say no; but perhaps because her heart was full of her dead brother she gave no sign that she thought his presence was intrusive. She put her handkerchief to her eyes, and then she looked into his face again. 'It is very, very hard for poor mamma,' she said, in the softest, lowly-whispering voice. 'Her only son! She was so proud of him. She always hoped he would do so well; and papa died so long ago, and we had no one else to look to. It is so hard upon mamma!'

'She has you,' said Ben, wildly, feeling that some reply was looked for, and not knowing what he said.

'Ah! yes; but I am only a girl. I can love her, but what more can I do?' said this celestial creature with piteous looks. Ben's brain went round and round. He was in some enchanted place, some magician's castle. What had he to do there, listening to these soft plaints, receiving those looks which would have melted a heart of stone? In his amaze he turned half round to his friend, who alone gave him any title to be present, and his appeal was not in vain.

'I came home only this morning,' said Hillyard, 'and, of course, the first thing I thought of was to discharge my sad commission. My friend, Mr. Ren-

ton, came with me, as he knows better how things go on here than I do. If we could be of any use——'

Ben had got up and bowed in his embarrassment. He was overcome, he thought, with pity, certainly with another and stronger sentiment. 'If there is anything I can do—?' he said eagerly. As he spoke the mother raised her head and shot him through and through with a sudden glance of her eyes,—eyes which must once have been soft like her daughter's, but which had grown keen, clear, and cold, instead of soft—with a hungry look in them. But how can you criticise a woman in such circumstances? They might be puckered up with grief; it might be the anguish of Rachel's weeping that looked through them. She said, 'It is very kind,' looking at them both, contrasting as it were the two togother; and then with a certain abruptness, 'What was it you were saying to me about some Rentons, Millicent?' she asked.

'You know, mamma,' said the daughter, 'Thornycroft, where I was at school, was close to the Manor, and Mary Westbury was always talking of her cousins. But perhaps this gentleman——'

'Yes; I am one of Mary Westbury's cousins,' said Ben, with a throb of delight; and then he paused, thinking what else he could say to ingratiate himself. 'I am the eldest;—Ben,' he added, with heightened colour;—and mother and daughter both looked at him with an interest which they did not attempt to disguise.

'I have heard so often of Ben,' said Miss Tracy, with a soft, little laugh. The sound of his own name so softly uttered completed the young man's bewilderment. He forgot how soon that laugh had followed on the tears, and how entirely the mother and daughter had both thrown themselves into the new subject. As for Hillyard, he sat between the two with a puzzled expression on his face. Nobody took any notice of him after the telling of his story. His friend who had the cachet of the latest civilisation on him, who was a Renton of Renton, the eldest son, was a very different person from an adventurer out of the bush. Mrs. Tracy herself came forward from the little back drawing-room where she had been sitting, and took a chair near the new object of interest. She was a handsome woman still for her age, and showed traces of having been like her daughter. She had the same clear, fine features; the same dark hair, still unchanged in colour; the same height and drooping grace of form. But her eyes, instead of being soft and dewy, were hard and keen; her lips were thin, and the muscles all tightened about them. Her hands were thin and long, and looked as if they could grasp and hold fast. 'The daughter will grow like the mother, and I'd trust neither of them,' Hillyard said to himself; but there might be a certain spite in it, for they showed no interest in him.

'It is very kind of you to come,' said the widow, leaving it undecided whom she was addressing, but

looking at Ben. 'Though it is three months since I first heard of my dear boy's death, this visit brings it all back. He was my only son; and oh! what hopes are buried with him, Mr. Renton! I thought that it was he that would have restored us to our natural place in the world. My Millicent was not born to live in a back street opposite livery stables. I expected everything from her brother. Man proposes, but God disposes. I cannot tell you what heaps of money I spent on him getting him ready for that examination; and yet it all came to nothing:—and now he is gone!'

'Dear mamma, we must not strive against Providence,' said Millicent, putting her handkerchief lightly to her eyes.

'No, my dear,' said her mother; 'but if it was to be, I might have been spared all that waste of money,—when we are so ill able to afford it. Providence knows best, to be sure; but still, when it was to be, it might have been so arranged that I should have saved that. You will think it strange of me to say so; but my thought by night and by day is, what will my child do when I die?'

'Dear mamma, don't say any more,' said Millicent again. 'I never grudged anything that was for poor Fitzgerald's advantage; and I am sure, neither did you.'

'Not if it had been for his advantage,' said Mrs. Tracy, gloomily; 'but you know how he broke down

in his examination, poor fellow. I don't want to blame Providence,—but still I might have been spared that.'

'Perhaps, Ben, we had better go,' said Hillyard. 'We are only intruding upon painful recollections. He was heartbroken, poor fellow. He never could forget what you had spent upon him, and that he made so little return. Ben, I think we should go.'

'No; he never made any return,' said Mrs. Tracy. 'When one spends so much on one child without a return, one feels that one has been unjust to the rest. We are not very lively people; but I hope you will not hurry away. It was so very good of you to come. Millicent, ring for some tea. I shall be very glad to see both of you if you like to come to us sometimes of an evening. It is a very dull time of year to be in town. My poor boy has made it impossible for me to take Millicent to the sea this year; and if you are going to be in town, Mr. Renton, as you and she are almost old friends, I shall be very glad to see you; and you too, Mr. Hillyard,' she added, turning half round to him. Hillyard muttered 'By Jove!' to himself, under his breath. But as for Ben, so suddenly and enthusiastically received into the bosom of the family, his eyes brightened, and his face crimsoned over with pleasure.

'I shall be in town all the rest of the year,' he said; 'indeed, I am looking for rooms in this neigh-

bourhood. I have something to do,—that is,—I shall want to be near Manchester Square. I shall be too glad, if you will let me, to come now and then. I must write to Mary and tell her what her relationship has gained me,' said Ben, with a glow of satisfaction; while Hillyard looked on sardonic, probably because he had been asked, 'too,' as Ben's appendage, which was a curious reversal of affairs.

'How is dear Mary?' said Miss Tracy; 'and where is she just now? I dare say going on a round of nice visits,' she added, with a soft sigh; 'her circumstances are so different from ours.'

'She was with my mother when I left home,' said Ben, his face clouding over. 'She will not have many visits this year, poor girl. My mother is very fond of her, which is a great comfort to us all just now.'

Millicent Tracy looked at him with her blue eyes, which seemed ready to overflow with soft tears; and Ben, who had the calm consciousness, common to great people, that everybody must 'know what had happened,' felt her sympathy go to his heart. But as it chanced she had not the least idea what had happened. The ladies had not had their 'Times' the day on which Mr. Renton's death was announced, or else they had been interrupted by visitors, or some accident had happened to the supplement; but, anyhow, they were in ignorance of that event. It was sufficiently clear, however, that something had come upon the

Renton family to call for sympathy, and sympathy accordingly shone sweetly out of Millicent's eyes. As for Mrs. Tracy, her attention was turned to more practical matters.

'The ground-floor here is to let,' she said. 'I can't suppose it would be good enough for you, Mr. Renton; but still, if you had any particular reason for being in this neighbourhood,—the people of the house are honest sort of people. There is a parlour and a bedroom, quite quiet and respectable. And if we could be of any use——'

'A thousand thanks,' said Ben. He was very reluctant to leave the paradise on which he had thus suddenly stumbled, but Hillyard, the neglected one, had got up and stood waiting for him. 'I shall look at them as I go down-stairs.'

And then Millicent gave him her soft hand. 'I have known Mary's cousin for years,' she said, smiling at him, with a little blush and half apology. It was as if an angel had apologised for entering a mortal household unawares. Ben went down the narrow staircase dazed and giddy, treading, not on the poor worn carpets, but on some celestial path of flowers. He looked at the low, melancholy room below clothed in black haircloth, and veiled with curtains of darkling red, and thought it a bower of bliss. Something, however, restrained him from securing this paradise while Hillyard was still with him. He whispered to the eager landlady that he would return and settle

with her, and went out into the street a different being. It looked a different street, transfigured somehow. The old white horse and the rusty carriage, and the man in white cotton gloves, with his pretence at livery, stood before a house, a little farther down; and it seemed to Ben an equipage for the gods. Everything was changed. The only thing that troubled him was that Hillyard took his arm once more, as if supposing he meant to be dragged back to that wretched club.

'It is easy to see I am not a swell like you,' said Hillyard. 'I never pretended I was; but I had no idea it was written on my face so plainly till I read it in that old woman's eyes.'

'She is not exactly an old woman,' said Ben, making an effort to get free of his companion's arm.

'Oh dear, no; not at all!' said Hillyard. 'But if the daughter is,—say five-and-twenty——'

'I should say eighteen,' said Ben.

'Oh, by Jove! that's going too fast,' cried his companion; 'though I can't wonder, considering the dead set they made at you. That girl is stunning, Ben; but she thinks you're the heir of all your father's property, and have the Manor at your command. Mind what you're after if you go there again. The old woman is as crafty as an old fox, and as for the young one——'

'Look here, Hillyard,' said Ben, hotly. 'I am

introduced to this family not by you, but by my cousin Mary. If it had been you, of course you might say what you like of your own friends; but I consider they are Mary Westbury's friends, and I can't have you speak of them in such a tone,—for my cousin's sake.'

'Ah! I see,' said Hillyard, ironically. 'But poor Tracy was my friend, not Miss Westbury's, and I suppose I may talk of him if I like. It was the mother that drove him to it, Ben. Don't you think it's my line to speak ill of women. I've a dear little mother myself, thank God; and a little sister as sweet as a daisy,—and about as poor,' the adventurer added, with a sigh; 'but I hate that kind of woman. You may growl if you please. I do. After he broke down in his examination she never gave him a moment's peace. She kept writing to him for money, and upbraiding him for having none to send her, when the poor wretch could not earn bread for himself. That much I know;—and you heard how she spoke of him. If you have anything to do with these two women you will come to grief.'

'If every woman who has a good-for-nothing son or brother was to be judged as harshly——' said Ben, making an effort to keep his temper. Hillyard turned round upon him with a hoarse exclamation of anger.

'He was not a good-for-nothing, by ——!' he cried. 'You know nothing about him. You call a

man names in his grave, poor fellow, because a girl has got a pair of pretty blue eyes.'

'It appears to me that our road is no longer the same,' said Ben, with the superiority of temper and good manners. 'I am going to my rooms, and you, I suppose, are going back to the club. I daresay we shall meet there shortly, as we are the only men in town. Good morning, just now.'

And thus they parted almost as suddenly as they met. Ben went into the Park, and composed himself with a long walk, at first with a pretence of making his way to his rooms, as he had said. He went across almost to the gate, and then he turned and made a circuit back again. He wanted cheap lodgings, that was evident,—and then!—The truth was that his mind was swept and garnished, emptied of all the traditions, and occupations, and hopes of his previous life. All had ended for him as by a sudden deluge, and the chambers stood open for the first inhabitant that had force enough to enter. Was it love that had burst in like an armed man? A certain sweet agitation took possession of his whole being. His agitation had been bitter enough in the morning, when he took the account of all those dead household gods of his, from which no comfort came; or rather it had been a kind of bitter calm,—death after a fashion. Now life had rushed back and tingled in all his veins. The world was no more a desert, but full of unknown beauty and wonder. Since his first step out of the

familiar ways had taught him so much, what might not his further progress reveal? Might it not be, after all, that his deliverance from the conventional round was the opening of a new, and fresh, and glorious existence? Would not he be as free in Guildford Street, Manchester Square, as in the back-woods,—as undisturbed by impertinent observation? What were the buhl cabinets and the old Dresden in comparison with horsehair, and mahogany, and Millicent Tracy's blue eyes up-stairs? He tried to consider the matter calmly without reference to those eyes, and he thought he succeeded in doing so. He reminded himself with elaborate, almost judicial, calm that he had but two hundred pounds a-year; that he could not afford to live at the Albany any longer; that cheap lodgings were necessary to him, not altogether out of reach of the world, but beyond the inspection of curious acquaintances. Under these circumstances the adaptation to all his wants of the ground-floor at No. 10 was almost miraculous. It was Providential. Ben had not been in the habit of using that word as some people do; but yet he felt that in the present remarkable circumstances the use of it was justifiable. Something beyond ordinary chance must have guided him in his ignorance to exactly the place he wanted. And the machinery employed to bring about this single result had been so elaborate and complicated. First, a suicide far off in Australia; second, the return of an adventurer

who had been sent there expressly to make Fitzgerald Tracy's acquaintance, and convey his dying message;—a friendship which had been brought about by such means surely must count for something in a man's life.

And so by degrees Ben found himself once more approaching the street. He knocked at the door with a curious thrill and tremor. What if he should see her again! What if she might be passing up and down after some of her celestial concerns! He was admitted by a dismal maid-of-all-work, and shown in this time to the rooms which were the object of his ambition. They were very dingy little rooms. In their original and normal state they made a double room with folding-doors; but as arranged for a lodger, the folding-doors had been closed and barricaded, the front half made into a sitting-room, and the back into a bed-room. The windows were closed, and in the sultry September evening the four mean walls seemed to close round the inmate and stifle him. Such a thought had half stolen across his mind when a sudden movement above thrilled him through and through. It seemed to vibrate through the house and through him. No need to ask any further question:—undoubtedly it must have been her step; and immediately the musty air grew sweet as summer to foolish Ben.

The result was that he took the wretched little rooms for thirty shillings a-week, conveying to his

future landlady as he did so the meanest possible opinion of his intellectual powers. 'Some fool,' she replied to her husband, 'as never asked no questions.' He thought them very cheap, poor fellow; he thought them highly economical, retired, respectable, and exactly what he wanted. And he was rewarded, and more than rewarded, for his promptitude. Just as he had settled with the landlady a little creak on the stairs and rustling of ladies' dresses set all his pulses beating. And when he turned sharply round there were the mother and daughter in their crape bonnets equipped for their evening walk. They were immensely surprised at the sight of Ben; more, perhaps, than could have been fully accounted for in conjunction with the fact that Miss Tracy had been seated, all this time, at the window, seeing who came and went.

'Is it possible that Mr. Renton has come to look at the rooms?' the innocent Millicent said to her mother, stopping short in the narrow little lobby.

'I have not only come to look at them, but I have taken them,' Ben said, coming forward. 'They suit me exactly.' And there was a charming little flutter of pleasure and surprise.

'I never thought you could be in earnest,' Mrs. Tracy said; 'the rooms are well enough, but after what you have been accustomed to,—I was just saying to Millicent that of course it was impossible. But now I shall be quite comfortable in my mind,

knowing you are there. Living in lodgings is very trying for ladies,' continued the widow, lowering her voice confidentially as she went in with Ben to give a critical look round the sitting-room. 'You cannot think how anxious I have been to have some one I know here,—on Millicent's account, Mr. Renton. The last lodger used positively to lie in wait for my innocent child at the door.'

'Confounded impudence!' said Ben. 'I hope the fellow was kicked out.'

'Ah, we had no such champions as you,' said Mrs. Tracy, with a dubious smile. 'It was after my poor boy went away on that ill-fated voyage, so much against my will, Mr. Renton.—Yes, he has actually taken them, Millicent,' she went on, speaking louder as she turned round. 'We were just going out for our little walk. It is cool now, and there are not so many people about. We neither of us feel equal to fashionable promenades, Mr. Renton. We take our little walk for health's sake in the cool of the evening. It is all the amusement my poor child has.'

'Don't say so, mamma dear,' said Millicent. 'I am quite happy. And oh, Mr. Renton, couldn't you have dear Mary up for a day or two to see you? Cousins may visit, may not they, mamma? It would be such a pleasure to see her again.'

'Hush, child, you don't think what you are saying. Young ladies can't visit young men, you

silly girl,' said Mrs. Tracy. And Millicent blushed and glided round to the other side of her mother, as they all emerged into the street. Why should that mass of crape be put between them? Ben thought. But yet he had the happiness of walking to the Park with them, and catching, across Mrs. Tracy's shadow now and then, a glance of the blue eyes. They talked and amused him the whole way, leading him to the grateful shadows of Kensington Gardens, away from all chance of recognition by his fashionable friends, even had there been any fashionable friends to recognise him. They would not permit him, however, to return with them, but dismissed him under the trees. 'I am sure we are keeping you from dinner,' Mrs. Tracy said, 'and we could only ask you to tea. But I trust you will come to us often to tea, Mr. Renton, when you are our fellow-lodger at No. 10.'

And he went back to the Albany, not miserable and misanthropical as he left it, but full of loving-kindness and charity to all mankind. He went and dressed himself in honour of 'the ladies' whom he had just left, and who had already taken that name in his thoughts; and was most Christian in his treatment of Morris, promising him the best of characters and fullest explanations of why he was leaving; and he dined at his club, feeling that there was still light and comfort in the world. Hillyard was there, too, in the evening, reading all the newspapers, and

yawning horribly over them. To him 'the ladies' had opened no paradise. With a temper that was half angelical, notwithstanding the adventurer's rudeness in the morning, Ben was pitiful and compassionate to him in his heart.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WORKING OF THE SPELL.

For the next six months Ben Renton lived a strange life,—strange at least for him, who up to this time had been a young man of fashion,—répandu in the world,—with an interest in all the events, and all the gossip almost as important as events, that circulated in that curious, insincere, most limited sphere. He put his rooms into the hands of Messrs. Robins to be let, and he put his buhl and his pictures into those of the Messrs. Christie to sell,—and naturally, as it was September, no good came of either attempt for some months; and he took the ground-floor at No. 10, Guildford Street, Manchester Square. It would be difficult to describe the change which thus fell upon him. He who had gone about the Parks, about the highways and thoroughfares of the world, as in a hamlet, knowing everybody,—dining, dancing, chattering with every third person he met; now walked about the humdrum streets like a creature dropped out of the sky,—a stranger to all, seeing only strange faces around him. He whose life had

been minutely regulated and mapped out, not indeed by duty, but by that routine of society which serves the same purpose, wandered aimlessly about all day, or sat in his dingy parlour over a novel, with the strangest sense of idleness and uselessness. He had not been much more industrious in the old days, when he went from the Row to his club, from his club to the Drive, with the weighty duties before him of dressing and dining, strolling down, perhaps to the Lobby of the 'House,' or going from box to box at an opera. These occupations were not of very profound note among the industries of the day; but they filled up the vacant hours with a certain system and necessity. Now he had nothing of that kind to do. He might go and stroll about the deserted Parks; he might sit at home and work his way through one bundle of three volumes after another, and nobody would interfere with him. He had nothing to do. He had never done anything all his life, and yet he had never found it out before. One event there was still to break the monotonous existence of each dull day. Sometimes it was that he encountered Mrs. Tracy and her daughter as they went out, and was permitted to accompany them; sometimes that he was admitted to the drawing-room up-stairs in the evening. They were very cautious in those first openings of friendship; more cautious than they had been in its earliest beginning. Sometimes it so happened that for an entire day, or

even two days, all that Ben heard of his neighbours was the sound of their steps as they crossed the floor overhead, sending vibrations through the house and through his foolish heart. But yet the meeting with them was the event of the day to him,—the only one that gave life or colour to it. It was the sole gleam of light within his range of vision, and naturally his eye fixed on that gleam. Sometimes it seemed to him that, instead of being the fallen man he was, he had come there in a voluntary abandonment of luxury and pleasantness for Millicent Tracy's sake. Though the young men of the nineteenth century are not given to romance, such a proceeding is still possible among them. And there were moments in which Ben forgot that he had any other motive for his seclusion. It was a sudden infatuation, and yet there was nothing extraordinary in it. Everything was so new to him in this changed and strange life, that any powerful influence suddenly brought into being was sure to take entire possession of the vacant space. As he sat in the gloom and quiet, with all that had hitherto occupied him gone from his grasp, and this one subtle fascination filling the air, it was scarcely wonderful that he should feel himself a pilgrim of love, giving up everything for the sake of his divinity,—keeping watch at her door, as it were, laying himself down at her feet, separating himself from the world for her service. A certain indescribable sense of her presence filled the house. The ceiling over his head thrilled under her

step,—the rustle of her dress on the stair, the distant sound of her voice or her name, seemed to echo down to him in the silence. Though he saw her at the most once a-day, and not always so often, he felt her perpetually, and his mind was intoxicated by this magical new sense. He lived upon it like a fool,—like a man in love, which he was, though he knew nothing of Millicent except that her eyes were heavenly eyes, and her voice as sweet as poetry. He had not cared much even for poetry hitherto, nor had much time for dreaming, and Nature now took her revenge. His youth, his extraordinary circumstances, his unoccupied life, all conspired with this most potent of influences against him. At first there was not even any intention in his mind except that of seeing her, looking at her, filling his vacancy with the new lovely creature so suddenly placed before him; the place was empty and she had come in unawares, startling him by her smile. That was all that Ben knew about it for the moment. To win her, and marry her, and enter into another and fuller phase of life, had not yet dawned on his thoughts. She had stolen in upon him like a new atmosphere,—a delicious air in which he lived and breathed. That was all. He meant nothing by it in the first place. He was not a free agent, voluntarily and consciously approaching a woman whom he wanted to make his wife. On the contrary, he was a man suddenly, without any will or purpose of his own, launched into a new world. He might not have

known that such worlds existed, so strange and new was everything to him; but the unthought-of, unknown influence possessed itself in a moment of the very fountains of his life.

It is not, however, to be supposed that Ben was petted or made much of by the ladies whose retirement he had thus hastened to share. At first they even appeared to keep him at arm's length with a reserve which chilled him much after their frank reception of dear Mary Westbury's cousin. They retired within the enclosure of their grief when he became their fellow-lodger, passing him with slight salutations, with crape veils over their faces and all the adjuncts of woe, and receiving his visits, when he screwed up his courage to the point of going up-stairs, with the dignity of sorrow not yet able 'to see people,'—a mode of treatment which gave Ben a pang, not only of disappointment, but of shame, at his own vain hopes, and the false interpretations he had put on their first little overtures of cordiality. 'That I should have dreamed they would care to see me,—and their grief still so fresh,' he muttered to himself with self-disgust. But the ladies up-stairs, in their retirement, were by no means without thoughts of their new acquaintance. They discussed him fully, though he was so little aware of it, and considered him and his ways in more detail, and with much more understanding, than characterised his brooding over theirs. It was not

Mrs. Tracy's fault that he was so coldly received. It was Millicent who had barred the way against him,—Millicent herself, whose paleness and sorrowful looks had given the last touch of tender pity and interest to his admiration. They were mutually mistaken in each other, as it happened; for the mother and daughter knew no more of Ben than that he was the heir of Renton, and were so foolish in their dreams as to believe that he had, indeed, given up all the delights of his former life to live in dingy lodgings in order to be near Millicent. He had been struck with 'love at first sight,' they thought, and despised him a little, and were amused at the fact, though fully determined to take advantage of it. And so strange is human nature, that the mother and daughter would have been as much disgusted and disappointed had they known the complication of motives which sent the young man into their snare, as Ben would have been had he been able to conceive the aspect in which they regarded him. He was a man of the world; and they were of the still sharper class of adventurers living on their wits; and yet they mutually believed in the single-mindedness, each of the other, with the simplicity of the peasant of romance. He thought the beautiful creature who had smiled so softly on him, and her kind mother, were interested really about himself; and they believed that he had thrown away all the daily brightness of existence for Millicent's sweet sake;—

so much faith had remained at the bottom of natures so sophisticated. It was a curious conjunction of cunning and innocence.

'I am not going to make any pounce upon him,' said Millicent to her mother. 'I won't. You need not look so surprised. You may say what you like, but I know it is fatal to go too fast. Men don't like that sort of thing. They see through it, though you don't think they do. They are not quite such fools. You must go softly this time, or I shall not go into it at all.'

'Millicent!' said her mother severely, 'when you talk in this wild way, how can you expect me to know what you mean?'

'Oh, bother!' said Millicent. The profile turned half away as she spoke was so perfect, and the lips that uttered the words so soft and rose-like, that any listener less accustomed would have distrusted her ears. Mrs. Tracy only made a little gesture of disapproval. Even to herself the mother kept up her pretensions; but Millicent was a girl of her century, and made believe only when the eye of the world was upon her. 'I mean to take this into my own hands,' she said. 'You are not so clever as you were, mamma. You are getting rather old. Let me alone to treat a man like Ben Renton. I must not throw myself at his head; he must suppose, at least, that he has had hard work to secure me.'

'And I trust it will be so, Millicent,' said Mrs.

Tracy. 'Heaven forbid that a child of mine should throw herself at any gentleman's head! It would break my heart, you know.'

'Oh, yes; I know,' said the daughter, with a laugh; 'though I never can understand what pleasure you have in pretending and keeping up your character to me. We ought to understand each other,—if any two people do understand each other in the world,' the young woman added, not with much perception of the melancholy mystery she was thus skimming over, but yet vaguely conscious that even the mother beside her had secrets, and would take her own way if occasion served. Each of them shocked the other by turns, though both stood low enough in point of moral appreciation. 'You would sell me, as soon as look at me, if you could,' Millicent went on. 'Don't deny it, for I know it; but Ben Renton is not in your line. It is I who must manage him.'

'You will have your own way, I suppose, Millicent,' said her mother; 'though what you mean by these coarse expressions I don't understand. What I feel is that the poor young fellow is very solitary. And I am a mother,' Mrs. Tracy said, with a little grandeur. 'I feel it might be of use to him to ask him up here. It keeps a young man respectable when ladies notice him. It keeps him out of bad hands.'

Millicent looked at her mother, with a gleam of laughter in her eyes. 'It is beautiful to see you,

mamma,' she said; 'it is as good as a sermon. But I am not so anxious about his morals. You had much better leave it in my hands.'

This was how it came about that Ben was so much thrown back on himself, and dismissed from the paradise of a drawing-room where his lady was, to the close, little, dingy, black-hair-clothed purgatory on the lower floor, to wait his promotion. A word, a look, half-an-hour's talk now and then, raised him into the seventh heaven; but he was always cast back again; while, at the same time, her presence so near, the constant possibility of a meeting, the excitement of the situation, and the utter havoc of his own life, kept him suspended, he could not tell how, and banished all wholesome thoughts out of his head. The mutual pursuit and defence, the plans to see and to avoid being seen, the art of bestowing and withholding, the perpetual expectation and possibility, engrossed the two completely after a time. It engrossed the witch as much as it did the victim. When men and women have passed the age,—if the age is ever passed,—of such contests, it is difficult to realise the way in which the lives of those engaged in them become absorbed in one interest. Each meeting between the two, were it only of a minute's duration, occupied their minds as if it had been an event. To watch him out and in, to calculate what she should say to him next time, how soon she might venture the next tightening of her line, filled Milli-

cent's thoughts as she sat over her work by the window up-stairs; while the sound of her foot, the faintest movement over-head, the coming or going on the stairs, the rustle of the dress passing his door, occupied Ben like the most exciting drama. It was madness, yet it was nature. The mother, who was looking on with an eye merely to the result, grew impatient, and felt disposed to throw up the matter and turn her attention to other things. Mrs. Tracy was poor, and now that her son had altogether failed her, even in possibility, it was essential that her daughter should take his place. But Millicent gave no encouragement to the vague plans that fluttered through her mother's mind. She, too, was engrossed, as people are engrossed only by such a strange duel and struggle of two lives. And the six months passed with her, as with Ben, like one long, exciting, feverish day.

'You don't get a step farther on,' said Mrs. Tracy; 'you are just where you were, shilly-shallying,—no better than your brother. My poor Fitzgerald! if he had been spared, he might have been a help to me. Providence is very strange! He lived long enough to be a burden and take every penny we had; and then, when he might have made me some return—— And it is just the same thing, over again, with you.'

'Don't speak of Fitzgerald, mamma,' said Millicent. 'I was fond of him, although you may not think it. You worried him till he could not bear it

any longer; but you cannot get rid of me like that. I will never shoot myself. I mean to live in spite of everything,—and I mean to take my own time.'

'You are an unnatural girl!' cried Mrs. Tracy, with excitement. 'Did not I do everything for that boy? Tutors and books, and I don't know what; and then to break down. A young man has no business to fail when his people have done so much for him. And now there is you,—I have spared no expense about you, either. You have had the best masters I could give you, and the prettiest dresses; and now you stand doing nothing. I should like to know what this young Renton means.'

'It would be very easy to ask him,—and drive him away for ever,' said Millicent, with a heightened colour. 'Mamma, I tell you, you are not so clever as you were.'

'I believe you are in love with him,' said the mother, with an accent of scorn;—'nothing else could account for it. That is all that is wanting to make up the story. But I tell you this will not do,' she added, with an instant change of tone. 'We shall have to run away if some determination is not come to. I have no money to carry on with, and there is a month's rent owing to this horrid woman; and the tradespeople and all——Millicent, there must be something done. If you are going to marry young Renton, it will be all very well; but if it is to come to nothing, as so many other things have done——'

'What would you have me do?' said Millicent, in a low tone of restrained passion. Perhaps she was angry with herself for playing so poor a *rôle;* but, at all events, she was disgusted with the mother who had trained her to do it, and thus kept her to the humiliating work. Mrs. Tracy was getting, as her daughter said, rather old. Her ear was not fine enough for the inflections of tone and shades of meaning which once she could have caught in a moment.

'If you will listen to me,' she answered, in perfect good faith, 'I will soon tell you what to do. Tell him that we are going abroad. You know how often I have spoken of going abroad. If we could only get a hundred pounds, we might go to Baden, or Homburg, or somewhere. We don't want so many dresses, being in mourning; and, with your complexion, you look very nice in mourning. I should like to start to-morrow, for my part. You might tell him it was for my health,—that I was ordered to take the baths. And I am sure it would be quite true. After all the wear and tear I have gone through I must want baths when you come to think of it. That ought to bring matters to a decision; and the fact is, that unless something happens, we shall have to make a change. It will be impossible to stay here.'

'If it is an explanation you want,' said Millicent, 'it will not be difficult to bring that about,—now;' and the blood rushed to her face, and her heart began to beat. Not because she loved Ben. It was a dif-

ferent feeling that moved her. The object for which she had been trained, the aim of her life, had come so near to her,—in a day, in an hour, in a few minutes more, if it came to that, she might be a changed creature, with all that was wretched banished from her, and all that was good made possible. She might be, instead of a poor girl, immersed in all the shameful shifts of dishonest poverty, a rich man's bride, fearing no demand, above all tricks, with honourable plenty in her hands and about her. What a change it would be! The chance of leaping at one step from misery to wealth, from destitution to luxury, has always a more or less demoralising effect when held steadily before human eyes, and this chance had always been put foremost in those of Millicent Tracy. Nobody had ever dreamed of work for her, or honest earning. She was to win wildly the prize of wealth out of the very depths of abject poverty. Hers was not the extraordinary nobility of character which could resist the influences of such training. She was demoralised by it. Ben Renton was to her a prize in the lottery which she might win and be rich and splendid and exalted for ever,—or which she might lose in mortification and deepest downfall. It was this which flushed her cheek and made her heart beat. Not because he was a man who loved her. And yet something not mercenary, something like nature, had been in the vague intercourse between the two,—the man's advances, the woman's retreat from them and

interest in them. Alas! Millicent had been wooed, and had done her best to attract and fascinate before. It was a trade to her. She lighted up into a gambler's flush of excitement now when the crisis was so near.

'Then let it come,' said Mrs. Tracy; 'it is time after six months of nonsense. I never knew a young man before who would be kept off and on so long, living in such a hole, out of those lovely rooms. And, by-the-bye, I wonder why he wants to sell those sweet cabinets. Getting rid of his chambers one can understand. Perhaps it is for some racing debt or something; but he must not be allowed to do it. If the family should make themselves disagreeable, Millicent, I hope I can trust to your good sense. Of course they must come round in the end.'

'You may trust me, mamma,' said Millicent, with a smile; and her mother came round to her and kissed her, as she might have kissed her had she been on her way to draw the fateful ticket at a lottery.

'Now, mind you have your wits about you,' Mrs. Tracy said.

It was the afternoon of a spring day, rather cold but bright, and a remnant of dusty fire, half choked with ashes, was in the grate. Millicent trembled as she sat in her favourite place by the window, chiefly with cold,—for she was very susceptible to discomfort,—and a little with excitement. When her mother left her, she let her work fall on her lap, and felt, as many a woman of truer heart has felt, the very air

rustling and whispering in her ears with excess of stillness, as if a hundred unseen spectators were pressing round to look on. He would come, and she would listen to him and lead him on, and the step would be taken;—the immense, unspeakable change would be made. A curious medley of thoughts was in the young woman's mind,—not all of them bad or unnatural thoughts. She would be grateful to the man who changed her life for her so completely. She would be kind to the poor,—those poor, struggling, shifting, miserable creatures upon whom already she felt herself entitled to look with pity. She would be very fine and grand, and deck her beauty with every adornment, and win admiration on every side; and yet she would be good at the same time. She would be good,—that she determined upon. And poor Fitz, if he had but been less impatient! if he had but lived to see this day! Thus she sat awaiting her lover. Poor, polluted, and yet unawakened virgin soul, knowing nothing about love!

The mother for her part put on her bonnet,—not without a keen momentary observation that the crape was beginning to be rusty,—and drew her shawl slowly round her shoulders. She had been a handsome woman in her day, and with her rusty crape still looked more imposing than many a silken fine lady. With a thrill of excitement, too, she took her way down-stairs, with more sordid thoughts than those of her child. She was thinking, also, which

would be best for herself,—to live with them and share their grandeur, or to secure a certainty for herself from the bridegroom's liberality. There are women ignoble enough to act as Mrs. Tracy was doing, and still with so much divinity in them as to be willing to disappear, or die, or obliterate themselves when the daughter for whom they laboured has won her prize. But Millicent's mother had not even this virtue. She was drawing her ticket by her child's hand;—which would be most comfortable, she was thinking; and it was in the very midst of this thought that she contrived to brush past Ben, who was lingering at the door of his room, hoping to see something of his neighbours.

'I beg your pardon, Mr. Renton,' she said. 'I did not see you were there. Not out this lovely afternoon? It is the old people who are active now; you young ones are all alike, dreaming and building castles, I suppose. Millicent stays up-stairs all by herself, instead of coming out with me. But indeed she is dull, poor child. An old woman, even when it is her mother, is poor company for a young girl.'

'I am sure she does not think so,' said Ben, to whom Millicent was half divine.

'No, I am sure she does not think so,' said Mrs. Tracy; 'she is such a good child. But you may run up and talk to her for half-an-hour, and cheer her up while I am gone. There are not many gentlemen I would say as much to,' she added playfully. Her

playful speeches were not very successful generally, but Ben was no critic at that moment. His eyes blazed up with sudden fire. He took her hand, and would have kissed it, so much was he touched by this mark of confidence, but Mrs. Tracy knew there were holes in her glove, and drew it back.

'May I?' he said. 'How good you are to me!' and had rushed up-stairs before she had time to draw breath. She turned round, looking after him, with a certain grim satisfaction on her handsome worn face.

'That is all safe,' she said to herself with a little sigh of relief; and went out philosophically to let the crisis enact itself, and buy a little lobster for Millicent's supper, by way of reward to her fortunate child.

CHAPTER VII.

PUT TO THE TOUCH.

Ben rushed up the narrow stairs three steps at a time, while Millicent sat listening with her heart beating against her breast. If he had known the flutter it was making, how glad, how hopeful, how proud the poor young fool would have been! And it was all for him. A sudden hush fell upon him as he went in at the sacred door. Such a privilege had never been accorded him before. He had sat with Millicent by her mother's side; he had spoken to her even while Mrs. Tracy went about from one occupation to another, leaving them virtually alone; but to have her all to himself for,—how long?—a year,—half an hour,—a splendid moment detached from ordinary calculations of time! His eagerness died into the stillness of passion as he went in. She did not get up from her seat, but greeted him with a little touch of her lovely hand, with a subdued gracious smile. If it could be possible that she was a little moved by it,—a little breathless, too! He came and sat down opposite the window, as near her

as he dared;—his eyes now shining, poor fellow! and great waves of colour passing over his face.

'Your mother said I might come,' he faltered, with the very imbecility of blessedness. And Millicent nodded her beautiful head kindly at him again.

'Mamma thought I would be lonely,' she said. 'Poor dear mamma! she thinks too much of me.'

'That is not possible,' said Ben. 'And,—how could she think of anything else? Ah, if you would but let me try to amuse you a little! You are so young,—so——; I envy your brother,' said the lover, growing red, 'when I see how you give him all your thoughts.'

'Not all,' said Millicent, 'oh, indeed, not all! Poor Fitzgerald! But we have so many things to think of. There is no more amusement for poor mamma and me.'

'Amusement is a poor sort of thing,' said Ben. 'You don't think I meant balls and operas? I am not such a wretched fellow as that. What I meant was, if—if you would but try to look round you, and see that there are others in the world——' here he made a pause, half out of awe of the words that were on his lips, half with a lover's device to fix her attention upon them, half because of the grasp of passion upon himself which impeded his breathing and his voice,—'who love you,' said Ben at last, abruptly, 'as well,—ten thousand times better than any brother in the world.'

He was not thinking of Hamlet,—but passion is something like genius, and finds a similar expression now and then in very absence of all thought.

'Ah, Mr. Renton,' said Millicent, 'you must not say those sort of things to me. Poor, dear Fitzgerald was not so very fond of me. Some women get loved like that, but I don't think I am one of them. Hush now! If you are going to speak nonsense I must send you away.'

'It is no nonsense,' said Ben. 'If you could but have seen my heart all the time I have been here! It has had no thought but one. I know I am a fool to say so,—if I were a prince instead of a disinherited knight——'

'Disinherited?' said Millicent, losing in a moment the soft droop of her hand, the soft fall of her eyelids,—all those tender indications of a modest emotion,—sitting bolt upright and looking him straight in the face. 'Mr. Renton, what do you mean?'

The suddenness of the change gave him a certain thrill. He did not understand it, nor had he time at such a moment to pause and ask himself what it meant. He felt the jar all over him, but went on all the same. 'Yes, I am disinherited,' he said, leaning over her, meeting her startled glance with eyes full of such a real and fiery glow of passion as struck her dumb. 'If it had not been so, could I have borne to keep silent all this time and never say a word to you? I am a wretch to say anything now. I have been a

fool to come here. Now I think of it, I have no right to any answer. I have nothing—nothing to offer. But, Millicent, let me tell you,—don't deny me that,—this once!'

'Mr. Renton,' said Millicent, 'I do not know what you have to tell me. It is so strange, all this. And I have been thinking all the time you were—— Never mind speaking to me about myself; that does not interest me. Tell me about this.'

'I will tell you everything,' said Ben, 'and then you will give me my sentence,—death or life,—that is what it will be. Don't take up your work. Oh, how can you be so calm, you women? Cannot you see what it is to me;—death or life?'

Millicent looked up at him, dropping her work hesitatingly on her knee. When he met that glance, the blue eyes looked so wondering, so wistful, so innocent, that poor Ben in his madness got down on his knees and kissed the hand that lay in her lap and the muslin that surrounded it, and cried out, with a kind of sweet heart-break;—'Yes, it is right you should be calm; I love you best so. For me, the earth and the passions; for you, heaven. I agree,—that is what God must have meant.'

With a deeper wonder still,—a real wonder,—that made her face angelic, Millicent listened, and felt the hot lips touch her hand. What did the madman mean? What was he agreeing to and approving? Had he found her out? Was he mocking

her? She was so bewildered that she said nothing; and she was touched, too, at her heart. She had an impulse to lay her other hand on his head, and smooth down the curls upon it with a touch of natural kindness and pity. Poor boy! whose head was all running on wild nonsense, and who could not understand the nature of her thoughts. 'Mr. Renton,' she said, with a little tremble in her voice, which was not affected,—'I am alone. Whatever you have to say to me it must not be said in this way.'

He rose up abashed and penitent, poor fellow! feeling the serene, fair creature worlds above him; and yet taking courage because of that little shake in her voice. 'Forgive me,' he said, with broken words,—'I did not know any better. I thought on my knees was the most natural way. But I see. A man goes on his knees to the woman that loves him; but I——only love you.'

And then he stood away from her and gazed at her, looking down from his height on her low seat, her drooping head, with such humility and splendour of devotion, that poor Millicent was dazzled. Men had told her this same thing before, but never in this way. Somehow it made her shrink a little, and feel a certain shame. Not good enough to go on his knees to her, he thought;—and yet, oh, so much more innocent, so much purer and better than she! Such an extraordinary scene had never occurred to

her before; and in face of the unknown being standing before her, all her experience failed, and she could not tell what to do. 'Don't speak like that,' she said, half peevishly, in her discomfiture. 'I am not a queen, nor Una, nor anything of the kind; and you are not King Arthur, that I know of. Come and sit down by me as you were before, and tell me about yourself. That is much more interesting. I do not believe you are disinherited. Come and tell me what you mean.'

After a moment Ben obeyed. He was nearer to her so; and she sat and gazed up at him, with heartfelt interest, which made him flush all over with a warm thrill of happiness. She gave all her attention to his story. He told her everything, watching the fluctuations, the shades of surprise, of sympathy, of something else which he could not divine, on her face. Once she put out her hand to him with a momentary compassionate impulse. She was deeply interested; there was no fiction in that. She was still more deeply disappointed,—sorry for herself, sorry for him. And Ben thought it was all for him. When she took her hand back again, away from him, and sighed, and suffered the cloud to fall over her face, his heart began to ache for her; for her, not for himself. He had roused her sympathy too far;—he had given her pain.

'Don't be so sorry for me,' he said, with his lip quivering, 'or you will make me too happy. What

do I mind if you care? I am young enough to make a way for myself,—and, Millicent, for you too,—if——' cried the young man, drawing closer to her. What could she do with such a passionate suitor? Perhaps she was not so sensitive to avoid the touch, the close approach, the almost embrace of the man she could not accept, as a more innocent girl would have been; though, indeed, there was not a touch of the wanton in her, poor girl! She was an adventuress and mercenary;—that was all.

'Oh, Mr. Renton, don't speak so!' she said, 'you don't know what you are saying. Though I am a woman I know the world better than you do. It is very, very hard to make your way. Look at poor Fitzgerald. And when you have tied a burden round your neck to begin with! Ah, no; you must not talk of this any more.'

'Burden!' cried Ben, all glowing and brightening. 'I like that! Divine cordial, you mean;—elixir of life, to make a man twice as strong, twice as able. Ah, look here, Millicent—you said round my neck!'

'I said nonsense,' she said, withdrawing from him; 'and so do you. Double nonsense,—folly! What could we two do together? I did not know about this, or that your father was dead, or anything. Don't look so wondering at me. What had I to do with it? Mr. Renton, I have not been brought up rich like you. I know what the world is,

and bitter, bitter poverty. Oh, how bitter it is! You are playing at being poor; but if you should ever be put to such shifts as some people are;—if you should have to fly and hide yourself for the want of a little money;—if you had to live hard, and be shabby, and not very honest—— Oh, don't speak to me!' cried Millicent, turning away from him, and bursting into uncontrollable tears. She was angry, and her heart was sore; she had seemed so near comfort, and prosperity, and happiness. 'Even I could have been fond of him!' she said to herself, bitterly. And now he could tell her calmly that he was disinherited! Such a disappointment after such a delicious sense of security was more than Millicent could bear. She could govern herself, as a man guides a horse, when she chose; but when she did not choose, her self-abandonment was absolute. Since he was to be good for nothing to her, she cared no longer for what Ben Renton might think. She thrust her pretty shoulders up, and turned from him and cried. She was sick with disappointment. And it was her way not to care for appearances except when they were of use, which they could no longer be here.

As for Ben, he sat looking on with a consternation and amazement not to be described. He grew sick, too, and faint, and giddy with the great downfall. But he was no more able to understand her now than she had been to understand him a little while before.

For some minutes he only gazed at her, his own eyes brimming over with remorse,—for was it not he who had driven her to tears? And he felt for her the tenderest longing and pity. He wanted to take her into his arms to comfort her; and would not, being too reverent to take such advantage of her distress. But he could not sit still and look on. He got up and went away to the other end of the room, shaking the whole house with his agitated steps. Then he came and knelt down before her, and touched softly the hands that covered her face.

'Oh, Millicent,' he cried, 'don't break my heart! I would rather have died than deceived you. Tell me what is the matter. Tell me what I can do. I will do anything in the world you please. It cannot be you who are poor. You ought to have everything. Oh, Millicent, say one word to me if you do not mean to break my heart!'

'It would do no good if I were to speak,' sobbed Millicent. 'I have nothing to say. Go away, and never mind,—that is the best.'

'But I will mind; and I cannot go away,' said Ben; and he drew one of her hands from her flushed cheek, and held it fast. He 'made her do it.' That was what she said to herself years after when the remembrance would rankle in her mind. He made her do it. He held her hand close in his, and drew from her the story of all her woes: their debts, their destitution; her mother's health, which was failing,

the baths in Germany which she was ordered, but could not get to,—all the miserable story. She poured it out to Ben as she never would have done had he been her accepted lover,—mingling the narrative with tears, with broken sobs, with entreaties to him not to make her say more. And all the time her hand was in his,—soft, and warm, and trembling;—her eyes now raised to him with pitiful looks, now sinking in shame and distress. And there was nobody near to interfere in this humiliating scene. Even the mother, who was lingering intentionally along the streets to give full time for the explanation, would have shrunk with a pang of pride and horror from such a revelation as this. But the two were alone, and had it all their own way. Ben himself sat by Millicent's side in a very ecstasy of tenderness and pity. If he could but have taken her in his arms, and carried her away,—away from the suffering, the trouble, the shame! Yes, he felt there was shame in it,—confusedly, painfully, with a burning red on his cheek,—and yet was intoxicated and overwhelmed by her touch, by her look, by the love he had for her. They sat together as in a trance,—passion, tenderness, trickery, mean hopes and great, shame and pride and dear love, all mingling together. Such a story to be linked on to a love-tale! such a love, veiling its face with its wings, loving the deeper to hide the shame!

When Mrs. Tracy returned, with a very audible

knock at the door, Ben rose and tore himself away, his heart, and even his bodily frame, all thrilling and tingling with the excitement through which he had passed. She had no sooner ascended the stairs than he seized his hat and tore out, jumping into the first hansom he encountered, with the instinct of old times, and dashing down to the far-off City,—blocked up as ever in all its thoroughfares where men in haste would pass. It was not too late to find his father's agent in one of the mean alleys about Cheapside, who would pay him his allowance. It was just the time for it, by good luck. And then he rushed off to Christie's, and had an earnest conversation about the buhl and the china which were not yet sold. He took no time to consider anything;—such a state of affairs could not, must not last a day. This was what he was saying to himself over and over. It must not last. He had no room for more than that thought.

When Mrs. Tracy entered the drawing-room she found her daughter lying back in her chair, with her handkerchief pressed to her eyes. Millicent let her approach without uncovering her face, or taking any notice, and the anxiety of the mother grew into alarm as she drew near. She had said 'Well?' with expectation and interest as she came in, feeling very sure of the tale there must be to tell. But as she came nearer and saw that Millicent did not move, Mrs. Tracy got very much frightened. 'Good heavens, Millicent! do you mean to say it has come

to nothing?' she cried sharply, with keen anxiety. But Millicent was by no means prepared to answer. She had been shaken by this totally unexpected, unlikely sort of interview. It had gone to her heart, though she had not been very sure whether she had a heart; and she did not know now how to explain, or what to say.

'Has it come to nothing?' Mrs. Tracy repeated, coming up and shaking her daughter by the shoulder. 'Millicent! are not you ashamed of yourself? What have you been doing? I know he has only just left you, for I heard him rush down-stairs.'

'It has come to a great deal,' said Millicent, uncovering her flushed and tear-stained cheeks. 'Don't worry me, mamma. I will tell you everything if you will but let me alone.'

'Everything!' said Mrs. Tracy in an excited tone.

'Yes, everything; but it is nothing,' said Millicent, doggedly. 'You must not give yourself any hopes. It is all over. It will never come to more; but you shall not say a word,' she added, with indignation. 'I tell you I am fond of him. I will not have anything said. He is too good for you or me.'

'It will never come to more!' echoed Mrs. Tracy, holding up her hands in amaze and appeal to heaven. 'And she dares to look me in the face and say so! Six months lost,—and rent, and firing, and the bills!' cried the injured mother. Then she threw herself

down in a chair, and moaned, and rocked herself. 'If it is to come to nothing!' she said. 'Oh, you ungrateful, unkind girl! oh, my poor Fitzgerald!—perhaps you'll tell me what we are to do.'

A little pause ensued. The disappointment was too sharp and bitter to be kept within the bounds of politeness, and Millicent was not prepared to enter into full explanations. While Mrs. Tracy vented her disappointment in reproaches, her daughter sat flushed, tearful, motionless, dreaming over the scene that had passed, wondering within herself whether anything could, anything would come of it after all,—neither hearing nor listening to her mother,—half ashamed of herself, and yet not come to an end of expectation still. 'He will do something, whatever it is,' she said to herself. 'It has not ended here.'

'I never would have stayed on in these dear lodgings,' Mrs. Tracy went on: 'never, but for this; you know I wouldn't. It was only to have been for a week or two when we came. Oh, the money you have cost me,—you and your nonsense! And now nothing is to come of it! Am I never to be the better of my children,—I that have done so much for them? To waste all my life and my means, and everything; and nothing to come of it!' she cried. 'Oh, you are a beautiful manager! And six months lost for this!'

'Mamma, you need not be so violent,' said Millicent. 'It is not my fault. Do you think I am not

as disappointed as you can be? And some good may come of it, though not what we thought. He will make it up to you somehow. For my part I have no doubt of that.'

'What is it you have no doubt of?' said Mrs. Tracy. 'You are more and more a mystery to me. Good gracious, Millicent! you make me think you have fallen in love with him,—or—some folly! But you must leave that sort of thing to people who can afford it. We must have some prospect for the future, —or—we must leave this.'

'Yes, mamma; only just leave me alone,—I can't talk,' she said, fretfully; but then added, with an effort, 'It is not his fault, poor fellow! He is disinherited. Could he help that? It was we who were the fools to think he would come to this poky place all for me.'

Mrs. Tracy swelled to such heights of moral indignation as would have annihilated Ben had he been present, when she heard this. 'Disinherited!' she cried. 'Millicent, you may say what you like, but it is nothing less than swindling. Good heavens, to think of such a thing! Disinherited! Do you mean to tell me it is a man without a penny that one has been paying such attention to? Oh, what a world this is! He might just as well have robbed me of fifty pounds,—not that fifty pounds would pay the expense I have been at. And I don't believe a word of it!' she cried, getting up with sudden passion. If

there had been any one below to hear how her foot thrilled across the echoing floor, she might even now have restrained herself. But she knew that nobody was below.

'I believe it,' said Millicent, rousing up. 'He was too much in earnest, poor boy! He wanted to work for me, and all kinds of nonsense. And it would be better to have him to work for me,' she added, half-tenderly, half-defiant, 'though he has not a penny, than be worried and bullied like this every day of one's life.'

'Are you mad?' cried her mother, stopping suddenly, appalled by the words. 'You are in love with him, you wicked girl! You are in a plot with this beggar against me.'

'He shall not be called a beggar!' cried Millicent, 'so long as I am here to speak for him. It is we who are beggars, not Ben Renton.'

'You are in love with him!' cried Mrs. Tracy, almost with a scream of scorn. The accusation was such that Millicent shrank before it for the moment, but she did not give way.

'I wonder if I shall be in love with anybody again?' she said; and then a sigh burst from her unawares. 'Poor fellow! poor boy! He is so good, and he will never forget me!'

'If he had really cared a straw for you he would never have come here!' cried Mrs. Tracy. 'Love!

—call that love! for a man without a penny! I call it pure selfishness. But he shall never come near you again,—never. Oh, what am I to do?—where am I to take you? We cannot stay here.'

'We are going to Wiesbaden, for your health,' said Millicent. It came upon her all at once that she had told him so, making use, involuntarily, of her mother's suggestion. 'Wait, and see what comes of it,' she added, with oracular meaning, which she did not herself understand. And after a while Mrs. Tracy's passion sank into quiet too. When people live from day to day without any power of arranging matters beforehand, and specially when they live upon their wits, trusting to the scheme of the minute for such comforts as it can secure, they have to believe in chances good and evil. Something might come of it. Somehow, at the last moment, matters might mend. She sat down with that power of abstracting herself from her anxiety which is given to the mind of the adventurer, and recovered her breath, and took her cup of tea. She had scarcely finished that refreshment when the maid knocked at the drawing-room door with Ben's letter. Mrs. Tracy flew at her daughter as though she would have torn the meaning out of the paper, which Millicent opened with the slowness of agitation; but she had to wait all the same while it was gone over twice, every word; the very enclosures in it,—and it was very evident that

there were enclosures,—were hidden in Millicent's clenched hand from her mother's eyes. She was wilfully cruel in her self-humiliation. And yet it was Mrs. Tracy, and not Millicent, who answered the letter which poor Ben had written, as it were, with his heart's blood.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. TRACY'S I. O. U.

MRS. TRACY'S answer to Ben's letter was as follows:—

'MY DEAR MR. RENTON,—Millicent has placed your most kind and generous letter in my hands. It is everything I have said, but it is a very extraordinary letter as well; and it is impossible for a young creature without any knowledge of the world to answer it. It takes all my judgment,—and I have passed through a good deal,—to decide how to do it. I would not for the world hurt your feelings, dear Mr. Renton, and I am convinced that to act according to the dictates of pride, and decline your most kind little loan, would be to hurt your feelings. Therefore I make the sacrifice of my own. I don't replace your notes in this, as pride tempts me to do. I keep them for your sake.

'And, besides,—why should I hesitate to confess it?—we are poor. I cannot do for Millicent,—I cannot

do for myself, though that matters less,—what I would. I don't know how far my poor child went in her confidences to you to-day. She was agitated,—and she is still agitated,—though I have done all I could to soothe her. She is much affected by your sympathy and generosity; and yet, with the shrinking delicacy which characterises her, she cannot forgive herself for telling you. "I could not help it, mamma,—he was so feeling," my poor darling says to me, with tears in her eyes. God bless you, dear Mr. Renton! With this timely aid, which I accept as a loan, my Millicent's poor mother may still be spared to watch over her child. It would have been impossible for me to go, and I tried to hide from my pet the urging of my physicians. Now it is all clear before us. I enclose a memorandum for the amount at five per cent interest; but what interest can ever repay the kind consideration, the ready thoughtfulness? I can never forget it, and neither can Millicent. When I say that we shall leave almost immediately, I but say that we are carrying out your intention. We shall miss you in that strange land. How sweet if we could hope to meet our benefactor among its gay groups! Millicent tells me something about your circumstances, which it seems impossible to believe. But if it should be true, dear Mr. Renton, how sweet it will be to your mind to feel that your little savings, if diverted from their original intention, will yet go to carry out one of the most sacred offices

of Christianity,—to save a mother, the sole guide and protector of her innocence, to her only child!

'Believe me, my dear Mr. Renton, with the sincerest kind regards and good wishes,

'Yours obliged and most truly,

'Maria Tracy.'

'Will that do?' she said, thrusting the paper across the table to Millicent, who sat looking on. Her mother's style of letter-writing was very well known to her; but her heart was beating a little quicker than usual, and it was not without excitement that she took it up. Altogether, the day had been a strange one for her. It had brought her in contact with genuine, real passion; and at the same time with a rare, almost unknown thing to her,—a man, with all the instincts of power, unconscious of those restraints which make I dare not wait upon I would. There is something in wealth which now and then confers a certain moral power and unthought-of force and energy. Millicent's friends and lovers had been hitherto of a class quite different from Ben. They had been men to whom appearance was more than reality,—who were accustomed to look richer than they were, and to own the restrictions of small means,—men who could not, had they wished it, have cut a way for her through a difficulty, as Ben did with sudden flash of purpose. In fact, he was poorer than

any of the half-bred men to whom Mrs. Tracy had all but offered her daughter; but the habit of hesitation or considering possibilities had not yet come upon him. Simply, he had not been able to bear the thought of want or difficulty or pain for her, and had rushed at the matter without a moment's pause, or any consideration but that of doing her service. It was quite new to Millicent. It dazzled her imagination more a long way than it touched her heart. She was not grateful to speak of, but she was profoundly impressed by the man to whom a hundred pounds,—that mighty object of thought to herself and everybody she had ever known,—was no more than a bouquet or a pair of gloves. She was not, even at that moment, ashamed of having all but asked, or of receiving, his help. She was only dazzled by the magnificence, the sudden lavish zeal and service of her lover. She read her mother's letter slowly and critically. 'As if he wanted to be paid back, or have interest at five per cent!' she said. The mother's were very different thoughts.

'It looks better,' she said. 'And if we ever are able to pay him back, Millicent,—besides, it is putting it in a business way. Every man likes to see things put in a business way; though this is such a young fool——' said Mrs. Tracy. 'I never met with such a fool in my life.'

'He is not a fool,' said Millicent, angrily. 'It is the way he has been brought up. He has not been

taught to consider money as we have. Oh, me! should we all be like that if we were all rich?' she asked herself with a thrill of wonder. Mrs. Tracy smiled grimly as she put poor Ben's bank-notes,—everything the foolish youth had possessed in the world,—into an old pocket-book, which she took out of her desk.

'No, indeed,' she said, 'not such fools as to give solid good for nonsense. Why, only fancy what he might have had for his hundred pounds! He might have gone to Homburg himself, and got a great deal of amusement out of it. He might have gone to Switzerland. With all his friends and good introductions, he might have got through the season with it,'—this was all Mrs. Tracy knew,—'with his club and dining out, and so forth. And because you cry a little he gives it to you! No, if I were made of money, I never could be so foolish as that.'

'Nobody ever minded my crying much before,' said Millicent, with a touch of sullenness; and then she threw the letter on the table. 'Certainly,' she said, 'a hundred pounds is a high price for that.'

'I accept it as a loan,' said Mrs. Tracy, wrapping herself once more in the appearances she loved. 'Of course I should never think of taking money from Mr. Renton in any other way. And I wish you would see to your packing at once. We never had such a chance before. Oh, Millicent, if you don't make something of it this time, how can I ever have any

heart again? There are all sorts of people at Homburg; and you look very nice in your mourning. One does when one has a nice complexion. What will become of us if I have to bring you back here again?'

'I have no desire to be brought back,' said Millicent, sharply. 'I am ready to do whatever I can;—you may see that. But fate seems against me somehow,' she added, putting up her hand to her eyes. 'One had every reason to think it was settled and done with without any more trouble; and here is the treadmill just beginning again. You are pleased because you have got your money; but it is hard upon me all the same.'

'I believe you are in love with him, after all,' said the mother with profound scorn. Millicent did not make any direct answer; but she turned away indignantly, with a frown on her face. In love with him!—no, not so foolish as that; but still it was hard when you come to think of it,—never to be any nearer the end,—just to have to begin again. And when everything seemed so clear and easy! A hundred pounds was very nice, but it was not equal to Renton Manor and a house in Berkeley Square, and everything that heart could desire. Poor Millicent sighed,—she could not help it. And he was so fond of her too, poor fellow! It seemed breaking faith with him to take his money and go off to Germany to marry somebody else on the strength of it. And it was

nice to have him always there,—ready, on the shortest notice, to come and worship. 'All because I am rather pretty,' Millicent said to herself, with that half scorn with which a woman recognises that it is the least part of her that is loved. Her beauty was everything she had in the world, and yet it was a little strange that that was all Ben Renton could see in her. Her transparent scheming,—her hungry poverty,—her readiness to marry him or any man who had money enough, and asked her,—that all this should be glozed over and hidden by a pair of pretty eyes! This is a weakness of which a great many women take advantage, but which always fills them with a certain contempt. Millicent, who might have had something better in her, and who could have been fond of Ben had he not have been disinherited, saw his folly with a half-disdain. No woman would have been such a fool as that! And yet she could not bear to hear her mother call him a fool.

She got up immediately, however, to begin her packing; and then she took into very serious consideration the question whether a new dress was not absolutely necessary for the new campaign,—a thin dress which she could wear over her old black silk, and which would looked 'dressed' at a table-d'hôte or other public place. 'Don't you think grenadine would be best?' she asked her mother, anxiously,—'or perhaps my white with black ribbons?' What-

ever might be her feelings towards Ben Renton, it was evident there was no time to be lost.

'It must be black,' said Mrs. Tracy, decisively, 'when you can have so few dresses. White is always the next step to colours, and we can't afford that.—not to speak of washing. Black grenadine wears very well, and looks very nice,—on you, at least,' Mrs. Tracy added, with a stifled sigh. She was too old for grenadine herself. To play her part aright, she wanted a rich black silk becoming her years. But it would make such a hole in the hundred pounds! She was compelled to give that up. They spent the evening with the room littered all over with 'things,' examining into their deficiencies,—two warriors setting out for the battle, and looking to all the crevices of their armour. And Ben down-stairs heard their soft, womanly footsteps thrill the floor over his head, and strained his ears to catch every moment they made. They seemed to have accepted his offering;—what were they going to do with himself? He sat, sick at heart, and listened while they went to and fro upstairs to their sleeping-rooms, down again to the drawing-room. He had put his door ajar, and heard everything. Sometimes her mother called 'Millicent!' from below; sometimes it was the sweeter voice of the daughter that replied; and every word rang through his heart, poor fellow! as he sat and listened. That there was a commotion of some sort going on up-

stairs was certain; and it was he who was the cause of it; and yet they did not call him to share the excitement. Or were they, perhaps, preparing to go away, to punish him for his presumption,—to return him his impudent gift of money, and reject his friendship? Poor Ben sat trembling, absorbed in a cruel fever of suspense all the evening. Perhaps they had meant him to be so,—perhaps it was only carelessness, their own suspense being over; but certain it is that Mrs. Tracy's answer to his letter was not put into Ben's hands till the movement up-stairs was quieted, and the ladies preparing to go to bed. Then Mrs. Tracy rang the bell. 'That poor boy has not got his answer yet,—how careless, Millicent!' she said; and Millicent half smiled as she went and sought it on the writing-table, underneath a heap of muslin. 'It can't matter much,' she said, with a slight shrug of her graceful shoulders, and yet gave it with her own hands to the maid. 'Tell Mr. Renton you forgot it,' said Mrs. Tracy; 'it should have gone to him some time ago.' And this was how the evening ended for the adventurers on the eve of their campaign.

It had been a trying day for Millicent. Thinking it over when she finally retired to the little dressing-room she occupied, this was the conclusion she came to,—a very trying day. Neither her education nor her experience, such as it was, had at all prepared her for such trials. She knew how to deal with the ordinary young man who was to be met with in

Guildford Street; and as she sat with her hair hanging about her shoulders, in the thoughtfulness of the moment a whole array rose up before her of men who had admired her, followed her about, and satisfied her vanity to the fullest extent, but who were not to be compared to Ben Renton in any particular. Millicent, knowing no better, would have married young Mr. Cholmley, of the firm of Cholmley and Territ, if he could have settled anything on her; or young Hurlstone, the solicitor, if he had been in better practice; or the engineer, who everybody said was likely to make so much money, had he not been so impudent about mothers-in-law, and so determined that Mrs. Tracy should have nothing to do in his house. She would have taken any of them, and thought it her duty. She had been even—must it be confessed?—a quarter part engaged to all of them before their shortcomings were apparent. And each in succession was eager to have purchased her and her beauty, though they all haggled about the price. But to have betrayed her poverty to them, or her mother's difficulties, was the last thing in the world that Millicent would have dreamed of doing. Had she done so her lovers would have regarded her,—she knew it,—with a certain contempt. Her beauty was much, and that she was an officer's daughter, and supposed to have high connexions, was much too,—enough to cover the want of fortune which she never attempted to conceal; but penniless, struggling with poverty, in

debt—oh, words of fear!—Millicent would have starved rather than have breathed such damning syllables in the ears of Cholmley or Hurlstone. But she had told Ben all, 'as if he were a friend,' she said to herself in amazement. And Ben, still as if he were a friend, had rushed forth and found what she wanted, letting no grass grow under his feet. What a curious, bewildering, unaccountable business it was! Poor fellow! Could he be a fool, as Mrs. Tracy thought? or was he more infatuated, more wild about her than any of them had been? or was it a new species she had to deal with,—a being of a different kind? She was so puzzled that she let her hair stray all over her shoulders and get into hopeless tangles. Poor Ben! And after all it was out of the question that she should marry him. This hundred pounds which he had thrust upon her,—and surely, surely, if he were not a fool he must be a very indiscreet, prodigal sort of young man, throwing his money about in such a wild way,—must be the end, as it was the beginning, of anything between them. It was very hard, Millicent thought; but for that horrid old Mr. Renton and his ridiculous will, instead of setting out on her adventures to Homburg, in the hope of finding somebody to marry her, she might have had Ben and the Manor and excellent settlements, and no more trouble. Old men should not be allowed to be so wicked, she said to herself. She would have made Ben a very

good wife; she would even have grown fond of him. A sigh trembled out of Millicent's rose lips as these thoughts filled her soul. What a hair's breadth it was that divided this shifty, tricky, sordid life, with its most miserable aim, from an existence so different! Berkeley Square,—that was, alas! the foremost thing in her thoughts. Her mind strayed off to caress the idea for a moment. She saw herself in the great old-fashioned, splendid rooms,—splendid to Mrs. Tracy's daughter, and not old-fashioned, you may be sure of that, from the moment Mrs. Benedict Renton had got possession of them. She saw herself getting into her carriage at the door, with such horses, such footmen, such a glimmer and sheen of luxury, and sighed again very heavily. Last night it seemed so near, so certain; and now, the old treadmill to begin again, the old game to be played, the old risks to be run! It had not occurred to Millicent even now how humiliating was that game. It was natural to her;—she had been brought up to it. But she doubled the beautiful, soft, white hand which Ben had kissed, and shook it figuratively at his horrid old father. 'Wretched old miser!' said Millicent, setting her pearly teeth together. And she could have made a good wife, and even grown fond of Ben.

Mrs. Tracy, on the other side of the partition, was not half so much disturbed. She had a hundred

pounds in her pocket, as good as a gift, she said to herself; for, of course, he would never ask either interest or principal. What a fool the young man must be! or did he, could he, think that she was such a fool as to throw away her beautiful daughter upon him because of his hundred pounds? Not quite so silly as that, Mrs. Tracy said to herself. It was the first real bit of good fortune her beautiful daughter had brought her. For husband-hunting, adopted as a profession in the very serious way in which Mrs. Tracy had entered into it, is a dangerous and difficult trade. Perhaps it would be safe to say there is no work in the world more hazardous, dreary, and unremunerative. Millicent's dresses had cost a great deal, and it had been very expensive taking her 'out,' before poor Fitzgerald's downfall and death made that impossible, and on the whole she had lost a great deal more than she had gained up to this moment. Now, here was the first earnest of coming fortune. With her looks Millicent might marry anybody;—a Russian prince rolling in money, most likely; or a millionnaire with more than he could count. The world was at her feet. Notwithstanding the small results her beauty had produced in the past, Mrs. Tracy jumped to the highest heights of hope. And as for Ben Renton and his hundred pounds! instead of regretting, like her daughter, she was rather glad that the game was still all to play. The

excitement had its charm for her. She was a gambler going about the world with one piece to stake; and, like most gamblers, could not divest herself of the idea that if she could but wait and hold on, she must win.

CHAPTER IX.

BEN'S REWARD.

When Ben received Mrs. Tracy's letter his mind was in a condition which it would be very difficult to describe. He had taken, as he thought, a step which would decide his whole life. And even in the moment of taking it he had been put to the severest test which a man can meet;—his love had been suddenly arrested in its high tide, and the woman he loved placed, as it were, at the bar before his better judgment, his finer taste. The shock had been so great that Ben's mind for the moment had reeled under it. He had felt equal to nothing but wild and sudden action, it did not matter much of what kind. He had rushed out and had done what we have already recorded, and now for two or three hours he had been sitting with no pretence at doing anything, waiting to see what was to come of it. Wild visions of being called to her,—of being made to forget in the charm and intoxication of her presence all the tinglings of shame and disquietude which against his will had come upon him,—possessed him at

first. He sat for long, expecting that every movement he heard was towards him,—expecting to hear her voice, or her mother's voice, calling him. He could not go out to his club for dinner as he generally did; he could not have eaten anything; he did not even recollect that it was his duty to go and dine. Such a madness to have taken possession of Ben Renton, a practised man of the world! But so it was. He sat and listened, thinking he heard her on the stair, thinking he heard soft taps at the door, saying sometimes, 'Come in!' in his foolishness, to the ghost of his own fancy. But nobody came near him. One would have thought that this want of any response after the great sacrifice he had made for her, would have acted upon him like a shrill gust of reality blowing away the mists. But, in fact, it was not so. Instead of opening his eyes it but dimmed them more with a feverish haze of suspense. How could he judge her when he was watching with breathless anxiety for her call, for her answer, for some message from her? The footsteps above him were treading lightly, cruelly on his heart; but the very continuance of their sound rapt him so that he could think of nothing else. What were they doing? What meaning had they towards himself, these women who seemed to hold his life in their hands? Every lingering moment in which the true state of affairs should have become visible to him, in which he should have come to see,

however unwilling, something of the real character of the creature that had bewitched him, encircled Ben with but another coil of her magic. Not now!—not now! After he knew what she was going to do he might then be able to judge. At present he could but listen, breathless,—watch, wait, wonder, and catch with a quickened ear the meaning of every movement. Any rational observer would have concluded that Ben Renton was out of his wits before, but the climax of his madness was reached that night. He had stripped himself of everything he had in the world,—at the moment,—for Millicent; he would have spent his life for her if she had but made him a sign; not in the way of self-murder, which nobody could have required of him, but of that more total suicide which consists in the sacrifice of all the prospects, and hopes, and possibilities of life. His love was not a selfish, complacent impulse, but a passion which mastered him. Thus the moments which passed so lightly overhead in that argument about the black grenadine were ages of sickening uncertainty to Ben.

This was brought to an end by Mrs. Tracy's letter. Such a plunge into dead fact after the wild heat of his excitement was enough to have brought any man to his wits. He read it over and over in his consternation. At first there shot across him a pang of disappointment, a sinking of heart, such as comes inevitably to those who are thrown

back upon themselves out of a roused state of expectation. And then he re-read it till the words lost their meaning. But there was something else which could not fail of expressiveness, and that was the silence which had succeeded so much movement and commotion up-stairs. For half-an-hour he refused to believe, even with the sudden stillness above and the letter in his hand to prove it, that all possibility of further intercourse was over for the night. He could not believe it. They were only stiller than usual. The note should have come to him earlier. There was still time to call him to them. He took out his watch and placed it on the table before him. Eleven o'clock, and every thing so quiet. Then he went out and listened in the dingy little hall, where a faint lamp was burning; then, half mad, opened the outer door, and rushed into the street to make sure. There, indeed, he was convinced of the fact which had been evident to all his faculties before. The dining-room was quite dark, evidently vacant, and above, in the higher storey, was the glimmer of Mrs. Tracy's candles. She was going to bed, respectable, virtuous woman that she was, with the hundred pounds accepted as a loan under her pillow, too virtuous to think of rewarding the giver even by a smile from Millicent's lips, which would have cost nothing. The poor young fellow came in with his heart bleeding and palpitating, one knows how, and then seized his hat and went out again for a long, agitated walk in the dark, not caring nor knowing

where he went. Yes; this was how it was to be. They had accepted his offering, but they had not a word to give him, nor a look, nor a smile; nothing but the formal acknowledgment of his 'kindness,' and Mrs. Tracy's I. O. U.,—which was worth so much! Ben walked on and on through the dreary, half-lighted streets, thinking, he supposed; but he was not in the least thinking. He was but going over and over the fact that there was nothing for him that night, that all hope was over, that the exquisite moment he had been expecting,—and it was only now that he knew how he had been expecting it,—was not to be. When some long-desired and promised meeting has failed to take place, and the watcher, obstinately believing to the last, has to confess that the day is over, the possibility gone, that the hour is never to be won out of the hands of time,—then he or she knows how Ben felt. And most of us have had some experience of such feelings. Thrills came over him, as he walked, of wild suggestion,—how she might, after all, have stolen down-stairs to say the fault was not hers; how she might have tapped at his door after he was gone. Ah! no, never that! Millicent would never have done that. And it was over for to-night, absolutely over! A hot dew of mortification and disappointment forced itself into his eyes as he marched along, nobody seeing him. Those dark London streets, wet pavements, gleams of dreary lamplight, miserable creatures here and there huddled up at corners, here and there loud

in miserable gaiety, danced before his eyes, a kind of grey phantasmagoria. What had he done? what was he doing? What would life be with all its inconceivable chances missed, and the golden moments gone away into darkness like this? For the moment Ben was ready to have recognised the claim of fellowship with the most pitiable wreck upon that stony strand. Like every real pang of the heart, his sudden ache went beyond its momentary cause. It struck out from that small misery,—as anybody in their senses would have thought it,—into the wide ocean of suffering beyond. The thrill that shook his being cast off echoes into the awful depths around him, of which he was but vaguely conscious. Such fooling,—because a young man had been disappointed of an hour's talk with his love! But these fantastic pangs are not the least sharp that humanity has to bear, though even the sufferer may get to smile at them afterwards; and any pain, if it is keen enough, brings the sufferer into the comprehension of pain; just as nature, it is said, makes the whole world kin. He walked for hours, forgetful of the poor maid-of-all-work in No. 10, Guildford Street, who was nodding with her head against the wall, and her arms wrapped up in her apron, waiting up for his return; and yet during all this time not one rational thought about the real position of Millicent Tracy and her mother, not one sensible reflection about his lost money, presented themselves to the young man's mind. He had not

seen her, could not see her now till the morning of another day,—most probably was going to lose her altogether. Such were the vain things that occupied his thoughts.

Next morning, however, Ben was desperate. The day went on till past its height and no further notice was taken of him,—perhaps intentionally, perhaps only because the ladies were packing, and had no time for visitors. When he could stand it no longer he went boldly up-stairs, and knocked at their door. To tell the truth, they had forgotten him,—even Millicent had forgotten him, having given him but too much of her thoughts the night before, and exhausted the subject. They were in full discussion of the black grenadine when he went to the door, and bade him 'Come in,' calmly, expecting the maid, or the landlady, or some other unimportant visitor. 'I must have something decent for evenings,' Millicent was saying, with quiet decision, absorbed in her subject, and not thinking it worth while to raise her eyes; and then, suddenly feeling a presence of some sort in the room, she started and looked up, and gave a little scream. 'Oh! it is Mr. Renton, mamma!' she said, with sudden bewilderment. She had thought he could be kept off,—kept at arm's-length,—and she had forgotten the important part he played in all this preparation, and the new start which was coming. She dropped her work, and her hands trembled a

little. 'Mr. Renton!' There was dissatisfaction, annoyance, surprise, in every inflection of her tone.

'How glad I am to see you so early!' said Mrs. Tracy, with the 'tact' which distinguished her, rising and coming up to him with outstretched hands. She gave her daughter a reproving glance, which was not lost upon poor Ben. 'Do come in. We had hoped to see you this evening; but this is quite an unlooked-for pleasure. You gentlemen are generally so much engaged in the day.'

'I have not much to engage me,' said Ben; and then he stopped short, with his heart aching, and gave a piteous look at Millicent, who was not paying the least attention to him. 'If I have come too soon,' he said,' let me return in the evening. I did not mean to disturb you.'

'You could not disturb us,' said Mrs. Tracy, with her most gracious smile. 'If Millicent is too busy to talk, she shall go away and look after her chiffons, and come back to us when her mind is at rest. As we are going so soon, I shall be very glad of a little talk with our kindest friend.'

'Oh, very well, mamma,' said Millicent; and she got up, with no softening of her looks. She was vexed that he had come; yet vexed to go away and leave him with her mother,—vexed to see him, with a feeling of doing him wrong, with which Mrs. Tracy's obtuse faculties were not troubled. She

swept out of the room without so much as looking at him, and then stood outside with a thousand minds to go back. She was not callous, nor cruel, nor without heart, though she had been brought up to one debasing trade. If she had never seen him after, it would have made the whole matter practicable; but to know all he had done, and why he had done it; to see the love,—such love!—in his eyes; and to be obliged to be polite and grateful, and no more! Nature rebelled to such an extent in the young woman's mind that it woke her to sudden alarm! Could she be falling in love with Ben? as her mother said. When that absurd idea entered her thoughts she turned quickly away, and ran up-stairs to her room, and went to her packing, leaving her mother to deal with him. No, not quite;—not so ridiculous as that!

'Have I offended her?' said Ben. 'Is she angry with me for my—presumption? What have I done to make her go away?'

'Nothing, my dear friend,' said Mrs. Tracy, taking his hand, and pressing it; 'nothing but the kindest, the noblest action. Oh, Mr. Renton, you must not be hard upon upon my poor child! She feels your generosity so much, and she feels our miserable position so much,—and, in short, it is a conflict of pride and gratitude——'

'Gratitude!' said Ben, sadly. 'Ah, how ill you judge me;—as if I wanted gratitude! I wish I had

wealth to pour at her feet. I wish I could give her —— But that is folly. Has she not a word to say to me, after all?'

What he meant by 'after all,' was, after the opening of his heart,—after the pouring forth of his love. But to Mrs. Tracy it meant after the hundred pounds; and here was a way of making an end of him very ready to her hands.

'Mr. Renton,' she said, with an assumption of dignity which sat very well, and looked natural enough, 'it was my doing, accepting it,—it was not Millicent's doing. I thought it was offered out of kindness and friendship. Any one, almost, would pity two women left alone as we were; and I accepted it, as I thought, in the spirit it was offered; but if I had thought it was a price for my child's affections——'

Ben turned away, sickening at her, as she spoke to him. 'Bah!' he said, half aloud in his disgust. He would not condescend to explain. He turned half round to the door, and gazed at it in an uncertain pause. Millicent might come back. When he thought of it, mothers were,—or books were liars,—all miserable, bargaining creatures like this. He would not take the trouble to discuss it with her. If he had not been so weary and worn-out and sick at heart he would not have been thus incivil. But he said to himself that he could not help it, and turned impatiently away.

'Ah, I thought it was not so,—I felt sure it was

not so!' cried Mrs. Tracy, recovering herself as her mistake became apparent. 'Dear Mr. Renton, sit down, and let us talk it over. Forgive a mother's jealous care. But let me thank you first——'

'I don't want any thanks,' said Ben, with a certain sullenness, as he sat down at her bidding on the nearest chair.

'For my life,' said Mrs. Tracy, looking him calmly in the face. 'Yes, it was as serious as that. Not that I care much for my life, except for Millicent's sake. It has no more charms nor hopes for me, Mr. Renton! But I could not die until I see her in better hands than mine. Don't be angry with me. You asked her,—you offered her——What was it, in reality, that passed between you yesterday? My darling child was too much agitated to know.'

'I had nothing to offer,' said Ben, with sullen disgust. To pour out his heart to Millicent, and to make his confession thus to her mother, were two very different things. 'I am penniless, and disinherited. I had to tell her so. Nothing but what I might be able to make as a day-labourer, perhaps,' he went on, with angry vehemence. 'Whatever folly said, she has apparently no answer to give.'

'In such a case, Mr. Renton,' said Mrs. Tracy, facing him, 'it is not my daughter who has to be consulted, but me.' He had given her an advantage by his ill-breeding, and now he had to rouse himself, and turn round to her and mutter some prayer for par-

don. He was in the wrong. As this flashed upon him his colour rose. Had he spoken as he now said he had it would have been an insult. It was an insult, the way in which he was addressing her mother now. 'Mr. Renton,' she said, 'I have put myself into a false position by taking your money; and what is life itself in comparison with one's true character? I cannot let you despise Millicent's mother. Here it is; you shall have it back.'

'Mrs. Tracy, forgive me, for heaven's sake! I did not know what I was saying,' cried Ben.

'There it is,' said his opponent, laying the pocket-book on the table between them. 'Now I can speak. Millicent is an innocent girl, Mr. Renton. She is not one of the kind who fall in love without being asked. Probably, now that she knows you love her, she might learn to love you if you were thrown together. But after the honourable way in which you have told me what your position is, I cannot permit that. I will speak to you frankly. If things had been different I should have been on your side; but I cannot let my child marry a man with nothing. She is too sensitive, too finely organised, too—— I cannot suffer it, Mr. Renton. That is the honest truth. We are going away, and you may not meet again, perhaps.'

'That is impossible,' said Ben, with a firmness of resolution which made her pause in her speech. He

spoke so low that it might have been to himself, but she heard it, and it startled her much.

'I will not let her marry a poor man,' cried Mrs. Tracy with the violence of alarm, 'whatever comes of it. She is not a girl who may marry anybody! She must make a good marriage. She must have comfort. She must have what she has been used to,' the woman cried in agitation, with a certain gloomy irony. She was afraid of him, not knowing that he might not put his hand across the table, and clutch his money back.

'Good; I will work for that,' said Ben. 'She shall have it. It is only a question of time. What more? What do you want more?'

'What do I want?' cried Mrs. Tracy. 'Is that how you speak to a lady, Mr. Renton? I want a good deal more. I want position and respect for my Millicent, and civility, at least, for myself.'

Ben got up and went and made a gloomy survey of the room, round and round, after the fashion of men, and then he came back to the point he had started from. 'I did not mean to be rude,' he said; 'I beg your pardon. I have spoken to you like an ass. I feel I have; but it is you who have the better of me. Put away that rubbish, for heaven's sake, if you would not drive me mad! I don't suppose she cares for me,—how should she? I'll go to work and take myself out of the way to-morrow. Only promise

me to wait,—wait till you see how I get on. You can't tell what progress I may make. If I do well you have nothing against me. You said so this minute. Wait and see.'

'And let my child sacrifice her youth,—for what?' cried Mrs. Tracy. 'Oh, my dear Mr. Renton, things are harder than you think! You don't know what you say.'

'Perhaps I don't,' said Ben; 'perhaps I do. Neither of us know. Give me your word to this, at least,—that nothing shall be done without telling me; nothing shall happen before I know.'

'Oh, what am I to do?' said Mrs. Tracy. 'How can I make such an engagement? As if I should be sure to know even before—anything happened! I will do what I can. You know I wish you well.'

'You will promise to let me know before—you bind her to any other,' Ben repeated, bending over the little table which stood between them, to look into her face. She thought it was to take up the famous pocket-book upon which everything depended, and uttered a little scream.

'I will do whatever I can,' she said. 'I will plead your cause all I can. I will promise,—oh, yes! Mr. Renton, I promise,' she cried, eagerly. He had even, as he stooped towards her, touched the price,—as she thought,—of the promise with his sleeve.

And then, utterly to Mrs. Tracy's bewilderment, Ben dropped into his chair, and covered his face with

his hands, and sighed. The sigh was so deep, and heavy, and full of care that it startled her. Had he not just got what he had been struggling for? She had given him her promise,—a reluctant, and perhaps not very certain bond,—and yet he gave but a sigh over it,—the sigh of a man ruined and broken. She looked at his bowed head, at the curious strain of the hands into which his face was bent. What a strange, unsatisfactory, ungracious way of receiving a favour! What a highflown, exaggerated sort of a young man! She was thinking so, gazing across the table at him, sometimes letting her eye stray a little anxiously to the pocket-book, with a pucker on her forehead and a cold dread in her heart, when the unaccountable fellow as suddenly unveiled his cloudy countenance and looked straight up into her face. Probably he caught her glance retreating from the pocket-book, for he laughed, and all at once, to her amaze and consternation, took that up.

'You must take care of your health,' he said,—and whether he was speaking in mockery or in kindness Mrs. Tracy could not make out,—'and when this is done let me know,' he added, dropping it softly without any warning into her lap. 'I may be rich by that time; and when I am rich, you know, you are to be on my side.'

'Oh my dear, I am on your side now!' she cried with a half-sob, and stretched out to take his hand, and would have kissed it, in the relief of getting what

she wanted. She did not understand the glow of shame that came over Ben's face, the stern clasp he gave to her hand, almost hurting her, resisting her soft attempt to draw it to her. And he held her thus, as in a vice, and looked down upon her stormily, keenly, as if asking himself whether he could believe her or not. 'And I will see her, too, before you go,' he said, with an abruptness she had never seen in him before; and then suddenly left her, without another word, closing the door behind him, and audibly, with heavy, rude footsteps, descending the stairs.

Mrs. Tracy sat motionless, with her fingers all white and crumpled together, and the pocket-book lying in her lap, and heard the street-door shut behind him, and his steps echo along the street. Then only did she draw breath. It had been a tough moment, but she could flatter herself she had won the victory. And yet she had a cry to herself, as she sat alone awaking out of her stupefaction. What a brute he was! Her fingers were crushed, her nerves quite shaken. But then she had the hundred pounds in her lap, and had given only the vaguest general promise by way of paying for it,—a promise which might be forgotten or not as it should happen when there were a thousand miles of land and water between the two.

'Of course I shall see him,' Millicent said, when she came down-stairs and heard a kind of report of the interview,—a very partial report given to suit the

exigencies of the moment. 'I would not be so ungrateful,' she said; and there was a little flutter of colour and light about her, which looked like excitement, the anxious mother thought. Could she be such a fool as to have fallen in love with him? was the painful idea which flashed again across Mrs. Tracy's mind. Surely, surely, not anything so ridiculous as that. And the best thing in the circumstances was to fall back upon the black grenadine, which indeed was a matter of the first importance. It was not quite so pretty as tulle, nor so light; but then it would be cheaper and wear better, and at those summer dinners in daylight, which are always so trying, would probably look even better than tulle. 'It must be put in hand at once,' Mrs. Tracy said, 'for we have no time to lose.' And it was a great relief to her when Millicent settled down quietly to try a new trimming, which she thought would be pretty for the sleeve. After all, she was a very good girl, with no nonsense about her; and her mother's blessing, could it have secured her the best reward a good girl can have,—the conventional reward for all exemplary young women,—fell upon Millicent on the spot. A good husband, a rich husband,—a very rich, very grand, very noble mate; if that were but attained what more could the round world give? Mrs. Tracy went and locked up her pocket-book, and got through an endless amount of arrangements that very afternoon. She had been in haste before, but now

she was in a hurry. It occurred to her even that it would be better to get the black grenadine in Paris, though it might be a little dearer. Anything rather than another such interview! On that point her mind was made up.

CHAPTER X.

THE LAST INTERVIEW.

Mothers were like that,—calculating, merchandising creatures, not worthy to unloose the shoes of the fair and innocent angels who, by some strange chance, were in their hands,—sordid beings whom it was just, and even virtuous, to balk and deceive. If this were not the case, then most books were false, and most sketches of contemporary life founded on a mistake. Ben Renton was not more given to novels than most men, but if there is one fact to be learned from the best studies of the best humorists, is it not this? And there was much comfort in the thought. It stopped him short in the course of disenchantment, which otherwise would have wrung his heart cruelly, and perhaps convinced him. She was not to blame. She had opened her heart to him, poor darling!—she could not help it. And now she was separated from him by an agony of embarrassment and shame, his money standing like a ghost between him,—who had thought of nothing but of serving her on his knees, like a slave,—and her delicacy, her pride, the revul-

sion of all her fine and tender instincts against the burden of such a vulgar obligation! This was how he managed to free himself from all doubts of Millicent. Her mother, it was clear, was a mercenary, poverty-stricken, scheming, sordid 'campaigner,'—but then most mothers are so;—and she herself was as spotless as she was lovely,—the soul of tender honour, the ideal and purest type of woman. God bless her! he said in his heart. Even the cloud he had seen on her face endeared her more to him. And if it should be his to deliver this noble creature from her mean surroundings, to take her from the society of the poor mercenary mother, to enrich her with everything that was fair and honest, and of good report! Ben's foot spurned the ground as this anticipation came upon him. He felt himself able to conquer everything, thrilling with the strength of a hundred men. Who said it was hard? If it were not hard it would be too sweet, too delicious, the day's work of Paradise amid the yielding roses and golden apples, not bitter sweat of the brow and mortal toil.

Two or three days passed, however, before the interview he had determined upon, and to which Millicent assented as a matter of course, could come to pass. Mrs. Tracy staved it off with an alarm which was partly selfish and partly affectionate. Her own conversation with Ben had been of a character quite unprecedented in her experience, and had

taken, as she admitted, a great deal out of her; and she was reluctant to expose her daughter to a similar experience. And then Millicent was still young, and there had been curious signs about her for some time back, — signs of something unknown, which her mother was afraid of. Such things had been heard of as that a girl, even in circumstances as important as Millicent's, with everything, so to speak, hanging upon her decision, and a good marriage the one thing indispensable in the world, should cheat all her friends and ruin her own hopes by falling in love with an objectionable suitor. Mrs. Tracy almost blushed at the thought; but still, as an experienced woman, she could not shut her eyes to the possibility. And Millicent certainly was not quite like herself. Sometimes she could not bear to hear Ben Renton's name; but again, if he were spoken slightly of, would flash up. And she was cross and uneasy and restless, exacting about the grenadine and the little things she wanted,—not easy to manage in any way. It might be dangerous to leave them alone together. For these very different reasons Mrs. Tracy exercised all her diplomatic skill to delay, and, if possible, put off altogether, this unlucky interview. And in the meantime all the boxes were packed, and such of the tradespeople as she could not help paying were paid. A hundred pounds is not a very large sum of money after all. She took care to point out to the landlady that she was only going for the baths, and might be

expected back again, so that people were not so very sharp about their accounts as perhaps they might have been. And she went so far as to leave her superfluous luggage in Guildford Street,—an unmistakable sign of probity. If the end of all their schemes were attained in Homburg, why then there would,—no doubt,—be money for everything; and, if not, why it was no use burning their ships until they saw how things would go. It was on the last evening that Ben found his way to the drawing-room with a smouldering fire of excitement in his heart. Not all Mrs. Tracy's skill could balk him of that last gratification; but she had succeeded in postponing it to the last night.

Millicent was seated where she had been the first time he saw her,—where she had been on that memorable day when she told him their need,—on a low, straight-backed chair in the corner, against the wall, with the light coming in on her from under the half-lowered blind. She was innocent of any consciousness of that perfection of effect. The blind was down only because Mrs. Tracy felt that it looked well from the outside, neither of them being sufficiently skilled to know how cleverly this device concentrated the light upon the beautiful head. She had some work in her hands, as usual, by way of relief and refuge in what was likely to be an agitating interview. And yet Millicent did not look much as if she should herself be agitated. Her lips were drawn

in the least in the world; her forehead had the ghost of a line on it; her foot patted in soft impatience upon the carpet. She was anxious, very anxious to have it over. What was the use of talk? She was ready to see him, ready to please him so far as she could, and yet she could not but be irritated with the man who had disappointed her,—could not but feel that his hundred pounds was a very paltry substitute for what she had expected of him. Millicent was not beginning her new campaign with any very brilliant hopes. She was ready, even now, to cry with vexation and disappointment. She never had brought a man to the point and felt that she could put up with him, and might have a comfortable life before her, but he went and got himself disinherited! It was all very well for the others, who had no particular trouble in the matter; and nobody sympathised sufficiently with Millicent to see that the very sight of him was tantalising to her, now that he was no good! At the same time, she was used to commanding herself, and did not betray these emotions. Ben went into the room with the noiseless rapidity of passion. She did not know he was coming until he was there, leaning against the window, gazing down upon her. Mrs. Tracy was out of the room, though she had not meant to be so. He had seized upon the moment, determined, at least for this once, to have everything his own way.

'Oh, Mr. Renton, how you startled me!' said Millicent. 'I never heard you come up-stairs.'

'I did not mean you should,' said Ben. He had come up very wild in his passion, with a hundred violent, tender words on his lips to say; but when he came before her, and gazed down on her passionless face, somehow the fire went out of him. A kind of wonder stole over his mind,—a wonder not unusual to men before such a woman. Was it anything to her at all,—anything out of the ordinary way? The meeting, the parting,—which shook his very being,—was it merely an every-day incident with her, saying, 'Good-bye to poor Mr. Renton?' He stood and gazed, with his heart in his eyes, at the calm creature. The very marble warms a little on its surface, at least, under the shining of the sun. When she raised her lovely eyes to him,—undimmed, unbrightened, no haze of feeling nor sparkle of excitement in them,—shining calmly, as they always did, a sense of half adoration, half scorn, awoke in Ben's mind. Was she chillier than the marble, then? Or was not this passionless sweetness of the woman, before the fiery love which blazed about her, a something half divine? 'You do not care much,' he said. 'I was a fool to think you would care; and yet I have been counting the moments till this moment should come.'

'It is very kind of you to think so much of me,' said Millicent; 'and I did want to see you, Mr.

Renton. I wanted to tell you that I never for one moment thought,—never imagined you would do anything, like what you have done. I should not have told you, had I thought so; I should have died sooner.'

'Oh, Millicent! is this all you have to say to me?' cried her lover. 'I wish it was at the bottom of the sea;—I wish——Never mind. Think for one moment, if you can, that I have never done anything—except—love you. That does not sound much,' the young man went on, stooping down, almost kneeling before her, that his eyes might help his words. A smile of half disdain at himself broke over his face as he caught her eye. 'It does not sound much,' he cried. 'You will say to yourself, small thanks to him,—everybody does that; but it is everything in the world to me. Have you nothing to say to me for that, Millicent?—not one word?'

'It is very kind of you. You are very good,—you always were very good to me,' said Millicent, hurriedly under her breath, with a glance at the door. Undoubtedly, Mrs. Tracy's presence would have been a relief now.

'Kind!' he cried, with a sort of groan,—'good to you! Then that is all I am to have by way of farewell?'

'Mr. Renton,' said Millicent, rousing herself up, 'I don't know what you think I can say. You know what you told me last time we spoke of this. You

said you were disinherited. You said you had nothing to offer me. Well, then, what can I answer? It is very good of you to—care for me. I shall always feel you have done me an honour. But there is nothing to give an answer to that I know of; and, indeed, I can't tell what else to say.'

'Ah, if it is only that there is nothing to answer!' cried Ben. 'Millicent, tell me I am to work for you,—tell me that when I have changed all this,—when I have made my way in the world,—when I have something to offer,—that I am to come back to you. Tell me so,—only that I am to come!'

With a little laugh, half of natural embarrassment, half of art, Millicent glanced at, and turned away from her lover, who was now fairly on his knees before her, looking up with eager, pleading, impassioned eyes into her face. 'That would be very like making you an offer,' she said, shaking her head. 'You cannot expect me to do that.'

'But I may come?' said Ben. He took her calm, soft hands into his, which burned and trembled. He kissed them with his quivering, passionate lips. Oh, what a fool he was! That was the uppermost thought in the mind of the beautiful creature at whose feet he thus threw himself. A man of the world, too, who ought to have seen through her,—who ought to have known that she was not the sort of woman to wait years and years on such a vague, nay, hopeless prospect. Yes, he might come if he

liked. What did it matter? If he was to make his own way in the world, no doubt it would be years and years first, and by that time his feelings would have changed, of course. It was easier to pretend to yield to him, and satisfy him for the moment, than to set the truth plainly before him and make a scene. Thus Millicent reasoned, not without compassion, not without kindness, for the foolish fellow who held her hands in such a tremulous, passionate embrace. There lay the special hardness of her fate. She could have liked him had everything been as it ought to be. She was sorry for him even now; but, after all, what did it matter? It must be years and years before he could have anything to offer, and of course his feelings would have changed a dozen times before that. It was best to smooth over matters, and make him happy now. Thus Ben came off victorious from both mother and daughter,—victorious,—conqueror of all real obstacles that could stand between him and his love. So he thought.

When he went down stairs again he found the vulgarest little envelope on his table, — dirty, crumpled, with his name scrawled on it in a style he was quite familiar with,—his weekly bill,—and he had not anything to pay it with,—not a shilling in the world!

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. BARTON'S LITTLE BILL.

There are different ways of being penniless, as we have said. The man who does his work from day to day may have nothing, and yet be easy enough; and the man who has wealth or expectations behind him may treat a momentary impecuniosity as a good joke. And most people, too, find it easy enough to be largely in debt. A big balance against him in some big tradesman's books seldom, unless he comes to the point of desperation, is very deeply afflictive to a young man; but your little, greasy, weekly bill,—handed in by your poor, greasy, termagant landlady, with hungry, or wistful, or furious eyes,—and not a penny in your pocket to pay it,—this is, indeed, to look poverty in the face.

And this is what happened to Ben Renton the day he took leave of Millicent. If it had been a snake in his path he could not have looked at the poor little crumpled envelope on his table with greater horror. He had been nearly penniless, it is true, for the six months which he had spent in

Guildford Street, as has been related, but he had never been troubled about his weekly bill; and he had nothing, nor any prospect of anything, for three months. And he could not dig, and to beg was ashamed. All the horrors of his position flashed upon him as he stood and gazed at it. His occupation was gone,—his enchantress was leaving him,—everything was over and ended. And he had no money, and nothing to do now that the delirium was over. With his pulses all tingling from the last meeting, and the strange intoxication of mingled content and despair in his brain, to plunge into this cold sea of reality, was something terrible. He caught his breath and shivered like a man near drowning. Then he sat down and took out his purse, and counted over the money in it. There were a few shillings left, and one sovereign,—the last of its race; and that was all he should have for three months,—he, Benedict Renton, the representative of an old wealthy house,—he who imagined himself Millicent Tracy's betrothed. He was going to make wealth and a fortune for her, and this was the foundation he had to start upon. And how to dig he knew not, nor to what to apply himself.

Then Ben seized his hat and went out, leaving the thunderbolt which had thus shaken him,—Mrs. Barton's little bill,—lying on the table. He had no need to look at it. Its crooked column of shillings was quite as appalling to him as if it had been

hundreds of pounds, for he had not a penny, so to speak. He had some five-and-twenty shillings in the world; and when a man has come to that, the mere amount of what he owes does not much matter to him. Small or great, it involved the same impossibility,—he had nothing wherewith to pay it. The evening had come on,—a May evening,—with a little fresh wind blowing, and a scent of growing grass and fresh foliage even in the dingiest of squares. London had revolved upon its axis since he had gone to Guildford Street. Even in that sombre neighbourhood the thrill of the new season was in everybody's veins; the tall dark houses round the corner, which had slumbered all winter, had now lights gleaming all over them. The old fly with the white horse, and the driver in white cotton gloves, which Ben had caught a vision of through the window the first time he entered that house and met his fate, drove past him now as he went out, with a semblance of dash and spirit, conveying ladies in full dress to some dinner-party. Six months,—and had he been slumbering, too, and had dreams?—or taking the most important step of his life, laying a sweet foundation for after happiness?—or throwing away so much time, and his peace into the bargain? Heaven knows! He went out and made his way through the twilight streets into the Park, where the dew was falling and the stars shining. Even yet he had not come to ask himself seriously the

question, What was he to do? His mind was in a haze of excitement, and uncertainty, and passion. It was like the evening landscape amidst which he went abroad,—lights gleaming about all its edges,—vague noises,—a haze about that blurred the distant outlines,—calm with the compulsory quiet which comes with an ending, whatever that ending may be,—yet agitated with fears and hopes and uncertain resolutions. There was the faint fragrance of the spring, and the soft sadness of the night, and the mystery of that indistinct hum and roar of the great city, so near yet so unseen! All this was round about Ben as he walked, and it was but a shadow of the commotion, the silence, the despair and excitement, that were in his heart.

He walked up and down so long, having the whole soft world of space and darkness to himself, as it seemed, that positive fatigue stole over him at last; and then he turned instinctively, almost without knowing it, to the familiar ways from which he had long been a comparative exile. When he found himself in the lighted street, pursuing the way to his club, Ben had become languid and listless, and was scarcely conscious of any stronger feeling than weariness. It was past eight o'clock, and in his exhaustion he remembered that he had not dined. For some time past, since the stream of life had begun to pour back to town, he had avoided the club, not wishing to meet former friends; but he was

weary and stupefied, and did not seem to care for anything that night. He went in and ordered himself a spare dinner, and sat down under cover of a newspaper, entrenching himself behind the vast sheet of the 'Times' to wait for it. Ben Renton, once amongst the most distinguished, the wealthiest, hopefullest, best-known of all the community,—and that only six months ago,—now with five-and-twenty shillings in his pocket, his life as uncertain as that of any adventurer, poorer than any day-labourer who knew where to get work for the morrow, waiting for his cutlet, concealed behind a newspaper! Could any imagination conceive so vast a change?

As he rose to go to his meal, however, Ben discovered that he had not been hid. Friends came up to greet him whom it was not easy to shake off; and when at last he got to the door of the room in which he had been sitting, a danger which he had not apprehended befell him. His name was called out with a positive shout that roused everybody's attention, and, before he could get out of the way, he was caught, and all but hugged, by his mother's brother,—a hobbling, gouty old sea-captain, who was the last man in the world he wished to see. 'What, Ben Renton! God bless us, come to the surface at last!' Captain Ormerod cried loudly, as he posted down to meet his nephew, making such a clatter with his stick and his lame foot as roused everybody. Such an encounter at such a moment was terrible to

Ben; but he had to swallow his impatience, and to brave it as he best could.

'Going to get some dinner? I'll go with ye, my boy,' said his uncle. 'Why, I've been to the Manor, and seen them all except yourself, Ben; and there is as much lamentation over ye as if ye had gone down at sea. Why don't ye go and see your mother, boy? My poor fellow!' the sailor continued, as they sat down together at the table where poor Ben's dinner was served to him, 'I don't much wonder. If the old boy had played me such a trick when I was your age——.'

'Remember it is my father you are speaking of,' said Ben, hastily, his pride and his affection all in arms. Home and its associations had been as things before the deluge to him ten minutes ago. How they rushed back upon him now at the very sound of this old man's voice! His father,—ah, yes, his father, had been very hard upon him; but, still, was not to be breathed against by any living man save himself.

'Well said, Ben,' said his uncle; 'well said, my boy! I like that. To be sure he was your father, and my poor sister's husband. But I may say I wish he had made a will like other people. Why, you might have been enjoying your own, a fine young Squire, among the best of them, if some one had not put such devilish nonsense in his head.'

As the sailor spoke, the phantasmagoria of those six months rolled away, as it were, from Ben's eyes.

A vision of what he might have been rose before him. A man, important to so many people, with power and influence in his hands, with a voice perhaps in the ruling of his country, with all kinds of private interests at least to take charge of, dependants to protect, friends to support and assist; and instead he had spent his time in the little parlour at Guildford Street, madly possessed with one woman's image, dead and useless to every creature in the world. Was this his father's fault?

'I'd rather not think on the subject,' he said. 'My father, no doubt, meant well by us. He meant to teach us to depend on ourselves, to rouse our energies——'

'Well, my dear fellow, well,' said Captain Ormerod, with an impatient sigh, 'I hope he has done so, that's all. I should have said you looked more as if you had been asleep and dreaming than anything else. And it was not your poor mother's fault, you may be sure, whoever was to blame. You might have written home.'

'I should,' said Ben, with compunction. 'I will write at once. I am very sorry. How is my mother?' his voice faltered in spite of himself as he named her. He had not so much as remembered he had a mother in the absorption of his passion. He almost thought he could see her now on her sofa smiling at him. Poor weakly woman! Not of sufficient mark in the world to be remembered

even by her son; but yet giving the lie very distinctly, now he came to think of it, to his bitter identification of Mrs. Tracy as the type of mothers. It seemed strange to him to be able to recollect so clearly, all in a moment, that he had a mother of his own.

'That's right, my boy,' said the Captain; 'and now tell me what you have been doing with yourself all this time.'

'Nothing!' said Ben. He had been hungry, and weary, and faint, and wanted his dinner, poor fellow! but the question took away his appetite. He pushed his plate away from him as he answered it. Nothing, and yet how much! But he could not betray what his occupation had been to this old man, who had outlived such folly, and, at the best, would have laughed at the young fellow's idiocy. He felt his colour rise, however, in spite of himself, and in his heart called himself a fool.

'Nothing! Well, I am not surprised,' said his uncle. 'They all feel, my dear fellow, that it has been most hard upon you. Laurie has been working, they tell me, in his way; and Frank is taking to his profession with all his heart. Frank, you know, is my boy, Ben. But, my dear fellow, notwithstanding your respect for your father, and all that, which is very creditable to you, I'd rather question the will, and get it set aside, if possible, than let myself fall into this sort of way, you know.'

'What sort of way?' said Ben; and then an odd, painful curiosity came over him. He seemed to have fallen out of acquaintance with himself in his old character, and was not quite sure what kind of a being he was now. 'You don't think that I have improved after six months' sulking?' he said, with a forced smile.

'If you ask me honestly I must say, no,' said the Captain. 'I don't think you have. I don't make you out, Ben. You haven't taken to —— drink, or anything of that kind? That's poor consolation. My dear fellow, I beg your pardon. One does not know what to suppose.'

'No; I have not taken to drink,' said Ben, trying to laugh; but his lip quivered in spite of himself. When he tried a second time he succeeded, but the laugh was harsh. 'I have been living on my income,' he said.

Captain Ormerod shook his head. 'I am very sorry for you, my boy,' he said; 'but I hoped you would have taken it better than this. Your mother was very much upset about your silence; but I persuaded her you were not the fellow to sulk, as you say; and Laurie and Frank have really borne it so well.'

'Don't speak to me of Laurie and Frank!' cried Ben, stung beyond bearing. 'What difference does it make to them? Frank is a boy, and a soldier, with his profession to fall back on; and Laurie is a

fellow that would always have mooned his life away; whereas I——'

'Well, if you talk of mooning,' said the Captain, sadly; and then he paused. 'Couldn't we do something among us, Ben? We ought to have some influence at least. If you had only been a seaman now, one might have managed somehow; but of course there's heaps of things. Why, there's all those public offices,' said the sailor, getting up from his chair, with a little excitement, and waving his hand in the direction of Whitehall and Downing Street; 'and very good berths, I believe, in some of them. 'Why can't we get you something there?'

'It's too late, uncle,' said Ben, gradually waking into rationality as the old life came back and grew familiar to him. He was able even to give a softened momentary laugh at the futility of the proposition. 'Don't you know there's nothing but merit and examinations now-a-days for every office under the sun?'

'Well,' said Captain Ormerod, pleased to feel that he had brought the wanderer back to a more natural tone, 'I don't see why that should frighten you. I have always heard you had a fine education, Ben.'

Ben laughed again, more softened still, and with moisture creeping into the corners of his eyes. 'I am too old to go to school again,' he said. 'A man has to be shut up and crammed like a turkey before

he can go in for that sort of thing. One has to be brought up to it. I am afraid that would not do.'

'Then why don't you go to India?' cried his uncle; —'or somewhere. You don't mean to tell me there are no fortunes to be made in the world, when a young fellow has the spirit to try?'

Ben made no answer. What could he say? A sudden sickness of heart came over him. She was going away to-morrow morning. Mrs. Barton's bill was lying on his table. He had five-and-twenty shillings in his pocket, and despair in his heart. And to be called upon to answer all in a moment, as if it was a thing that could be settled out of hand, how he would choose to go and make his fortune! In his impatience he leaned his head on his two hands, almost hiding his face between them, and turned half away.

'Or else dispute the will,' said the trenchant old sailor. 'Obeying your parents is one thing, and sacrificing yourself to a piece of nonsense is another. Your poor father's mind must have been touched—it must have been——'

'My father had a right to dispose of what was his own,' said Ben, haughtily; and then he broke down a little. 'Forgive me, uncle. I am dreadfully tired to-night, and down on my luck. We could not touch my father's will if even I would consent to try. I'll talk it all over with you another day.'

The old captain gave the young man a com-

passionate look as he sat thus huddled up, hiding his face in his hands, and made that curious little sound with his tongue against the roof of his mouth which is one of the primitive signs of distress and perplexity. Then he hobbled off into a corner and pulled out a pocket-book from his pocket and examined its contents. 'A little money can't do him any harm,' he said to himself. And as it happened, by a lucky chance for Ben, there were two notes, a ten-pound and a five, among the papers in that receptacle. The Captain made a bundle of them, folding them up with his gouty, lumpy fingers, which trembled a little, and came back and thrust it into his nephew's hand. 'You're not too old yet for a tip, though you're wiser than your elders,' he said. 'God bless you, my dear boy! Come and see me as soon as you can.'

And thus deliverance, utterly unlooked for, came to Ben Renton in his downfall. Such a tiny, little deliverance out of such a paltry ruin as Mrs. Barton's bill might have brought him to! But if the bill had been thousands, and this treasure a million, it could not have been more emphatically a deliverance. He would have avoided the club altogether could he have supposed his uncle to be there; indeed, nothing but sheer weariness could have carried him into it at such a moment. And yet the chance had saved him. Saved him! Only a ten and a five-pound note; but at this moment to Ben it was salvation, neither less

nor more. How curiously words differ in their meaning from one day to another in a man's life!

He sat there a long time after in one of those lulls which follow great excitement, sipping his sherry, which, though he had eaten no dinner, gave a certain soothing to his outward man, and looking as if he were in very deep thought. But naturally, poor fellow! he was not thinking, nor capable of thinking. Heaps of things were flitting before him in a kind of fantastic procession. The home, which seemed so far away; the mother whom he had almost forgotten; the life,—had it ever been, or had he but dreamed it?—which he had lived a year ago. Was it he, Ben Renton, whom Captain Ormerod's fifteen pounds had just saved from bankruptcy, who lived in the Albany once, and was the heir of Renton Manor, and one of the most popular men in society? or was it but a tale he had read somewhere in a book? His weariness lent another shade of confusion to the picture. And now and then these dim thoughts were traversed by one so sharp, so clear, so acute, that it chased all the mists away. She was going to-morrow. He had said his farewell to her. Her hand had been in those hands of his, on which he looked down with a sudden thrill. Her lips had consented, or at least assented, with that passive softness of the unimpassioned woman, which drove him wild, yet held him fast, to wait for him. Was it to wait for him? or was it only to let him come when his fortune was

made to try his chance again? What did it matter which? One form of folly or the other would have been much the same to Millicent, in her strange, compassionate, worldly-minded conviction that he would never make his fortune, or, if he did, would change his mind;—and in the confidence of his love and passion would have been the same to Ben.

Thus when the witch had routed once more all the softening charm of old association, he sat till there was nobody but himself in the dining-room. He had so much the air of a man who had no mind to be interrupted, that several of his old friends had felt themselves suppressed by a nod, and had gone without speaking to him. And even that unpleasant suggestion which had occurred to the Captain about the habits of the impoverished man came into the heads of two or three who saw him sitting with that absorbed look over his sherry. Could he have taken in his downfall to the meanest of all consolations? The thought troubled some friendly souls; but perhaps it helped to keep him quite undisturbed in the solitude he wished. It was getting quite late when some one rushed in with his hands full of papers, disturbing the quiet of the place—some one who demanded coffee—and threw himself down in a chair at the other end of the room; and then got up and began to walk about, filling the languid air with a certain commotion, a sound of rustling papers, and vibration of busy thought. This intruder caught

sight of Ben after he had been about ten minutes in the room, and catching up his documents, whatever they were, made a rush at his table. 'The very man I wanted!' he cried. 'Ben Renton! I thought you were dead, or mad, or at the other end of the world.'

'And I am neither, as you perceive,' said Ben, not well pleased with the encounter. There was no man in the world he less cared to see at this particular time.

'I have not seen you for ages,' said Hillyard. 'Mind, I don't want to intrude myself if I'm a bore. You have only to say so. But unless you've had more luck than most men, I have something that may be of use to you here.' And he put down his rustling burden on the table, and swallowed his coffee with a kind of impatient eagerness. 'I'd rather have had something more cheering,' he said, with a laugh; 'but a man must have his wits clear when he has business in hand. You don't answer my question, Ben.'

'If I am in luck!' said Ben. Already he had suppressed the inclination to impatience with which he had been disposed to answer his old acquaintance. Surely this was not a moment to repel any offer of aid. 'I am just as you saw me six months ago, which does not come to much.'

'Doing nothing?' said Hillyard, eagerly.

'Doing nothing,' said Ben.

'Then, by Jove, I'll make your fortune, my boy!' cried the adventurer, striking the table with his hand in his excitement. 'I'm going out to America next week to make a railway. Didn't you know I was an engineer? That before everything; — in a secondary way, traveller, sheep-farmer, colonial agent, littérateur,—anything you please, but engineer first of all. And I've got a railway in America to make, and I want a man to help me. Ben, don't say another word. If you like you shall be the man.'

Then there was a pause, and Hillyard plunged into the midst of his papers, from which he drew an unintelligible drawing, diversified with dabs of colour and dotted lines. Ben said not a word while the search was going on. A strange sensation, half fear, half hope, seemed to go through his veins. It was the first offer of work that had ever been made to him,—from Hillyard, of all men, who had taken him to Guildford Street and actually made Millicent known to him,—whom he had kept clear of since as a vulgar adventurer, not able to estimate such a heavenly creature but in his own coarse way. And now it was he who offered him the first round, perhaps, of the ladder by which he should reach her! With this there mingled a doubt of the reality of Hillyard's good fortune. An adventurer himself, what solid help could he have to offer to others? All these mingled thoughts rushed through Ben's mind while his companion was finding the plan.

When he had spread it out on the table, Ben gave an unsteady, nervous laugh, glancing at it without an idea what it could mean.

'I know nothing of railways,' he said, 'except travelling on them. I don't know even the meaning of the words on the margin there. How could I be of any use to you,—unless as a navvy?' he added, holding out his arm; 'and it would be easy to find a finer development of muscle than mine.'

'Pshaw!' said Hillyard, 'it is no joke. I mean what I say. You may trust to me to find you what you can do. The only question is, Will you do it? Do you want work? or is it only a makebelief about Renton and all that? How can I tell? You bury yourself out of the world, and never throw yourself in the way of anything, so far as one can see. You may be contenting yourself with what you have. You may be above taking a share of one's good fortune. I say again, how can I tell?'

'I am ready to work at anything. It is the height of my wishes,' said Ben, with a huskiness in his voice. Further explanation he could make none; but his heart smote him all the same. What right had he to a share of any one's good fortune,—and of this man's above all, for whom he had never done anything? He had not even the gratification of thinking that he had been kind to him in his wealthier days.

'Then look here,' said Hillyard, plunging into his work.

The two sat with their heads together over the inarticulate drawing till long past midnight. By degrees it became intelligible to the novice. Shortly it opened up before him into a possibility,—a thing practicable, a new hope. When he went back to Guildford Street in the early morning,—the morning which was still night,—his head was full of the new idea. He was no longer an aimless, half-desperate man, detached from everything but the one absorbing madness which had taken possession of his empty life; he had linked himself on again to fact and nature, recovered his identity, his independence, himself. The change that lay before him,—palpable, visible, unmistakable change from one hemisphere to another, from doing nothing to hard, open-air, undisguisable work,—had dispersed already the mists which made a mystery and vision of all former changes. He stretched out his hands to the past, even as he lifted them to the future. It was but this unwholesome, unreal interval which had made life itself look as a dream and a thing untrue.

CHAPTER XII.

MILLICENT'S NEW START.

While Ben was thus, unconsciously to himself, being drawn back across the threshold of wholesome life, the morning was passing in a very different way at No. 10, Guildford Street. The packing was not yet finished, which of itself was a troublesome matter, and, to tell the truth, Mrs. Tracy's feeling was that she would be glad to get Millicent safely away, and that she did not know what had come over the girl. Notwithstanding her displeasure with her, and fears as to her state of mind, Mrs. Tracy took care to provide a nice little supper for Millicent, on that last night,—such as her soul loved. The two ladies were rather fond of nice little suppers. They dined very hurriedly and quietly in the middle of the day, eschewing hot and dainty dishes and everything that had a good odour, lest anybody should call; and accordingly, in the evening, when they were free, and could indulge themselves without any scruples about gentility, they made up for their self-denial by having something they liked, which was generally of a

savoury kind. They supped comfortably after the labour of packing, and refreshed themselves ere they went to bed. It was at a late hour, and they had the prospect of but a short night's rest, for they were to start very early in the morning; and naturally this, their last night upon English soil, had a certain pensiveness about it, notwithstanding the savoury fragrance and comfort of their favourite meal.

'It seems strange to think that it is the last night,' said Mrs. Tracy, with not inappropriate reflectiveness. 'How many things have happened to us within these walls, Millicent! And perhaps we may never enter them again.'

'I hope not, I am sure,' said her daughter; 'a more dreary set of rooms I never was in. If we cannot make out something better than this, I should never wish to come back at all.'

'Of course we must both wish never to come back at all,' said Mrs. Tracy. 'I trust your next home, my dear, may be of a totally different kind. If I could but live to see my child settled, and enjoy the change a little,' the mother added, putting her hands softly together, 'I should have all I want in this world.'

'I don't see that, mamma,' said Millicent. 'You are old, it is true; but I think you want quite as much as I do in the world. You are very fond of being comfortable;—most people are, I suppose. And then you can get the good of things without the

trouble;—I should have more pleasure, perhaps,—if I ever come to anything,—but then I shall have all the trouble as well.'

'The trouble of looking nice and making yourself agreeable! I don't think there is much in that,' said Mrs. Tracy, with a little contempt. 'The serious business,—managing matters, and getting introductions, and all that,—always falls to my share.'

'I am sure I wish we were done with it all;—I hate it. I wish I had been brought up to be a governess,' said Millicent, 'or a dressmaker, or something. I should not have liked the work; but then one would not have had to be thinking always what would please some man.'

'You don't find it so difficult to please them,' said Mrs. Tracy, with a little gentle maternal flattery, such as was necessary now and then to keep the sullen shade,—which spoiled it,—off Millicent's beautiful face.

'I wonder I don't hate them,' cried the young woman, 'after all I have gone through! I am sure it would not be half so hard to go in for examinations and things like poor Fitzgerald. I don't see how a girl can be good if she were to try,—always brought up to think she may get to be rich in a moment, like a gambler! I declare, mamma, I will go to the gaming-place in Homburg and try.'

'I hope, Millicent, you will not be such a fool!' cried her mother, 'after all the pains I have taken to

keep respectable,—paying bills many a time when it was like taking my heart's blood; and you know, among the English, it's only disreputable people who play.'

'It comes to just the same thing,' said Millicent; 'and I tell you, mamma, a girl has no chance to be good, brought up like that to play for a man for his money. I hate the men! Let us go and play for the money; it will be far better; and then nobody like Ben Renton can come and look in one's face, and make one feel like,—like——'

'Like what?' cried Mrs. Tracy. 'Millicent, I have told you again and again that you are falling in love with that boy.'

'Not such a fool as that,' said Millicent, with a faint colour on her averted face. 'Like a swindler; that is what I meant. Why should he care for me? It was not him I was thinking of;—and then to think it should all come to nothing, after one felt so sure!'

'My dear, I know it was a great disappointment,' said the mother, with soft sympathy. 'I don't wonder you felt it; but there are better than him in the world, after all. I would not vex myself about what's past. You will enjoy the change, and your spirits will come back, and you'll find something better before long.' Millicent did not answer; she made a little impatient movement with her head when her mother spoke of change, and that sullen cloud, which awoke an incipient line in her forehead and

frightened Mrs. Tracy, came over her brow. 'You don't know what work is,' resumed the mother. 'Fancy what it would be to sit still at your needle for hours at a time! But to be sure it is all nonsense, and you don't mean it. I don't say it is not of more importance to us than to most people: but of course it's every young woman's aim to be married. It's all nonsense what people talk of women's work. You may depend upon it, Millicent, it's only ugly women and old women that talk that stuff. No man can bear to hear it. They like you a great deal best as you are.'

'As if I cared!' cried Millicent, with scorn. 'They are such fools! Just think of Ben Renton,—doing nothing, and losing his time, and never seeing through us all these months, and going on with his nonsense to me, as if I was one to understand it! And all because I'm rather pretty!' she said with disgust. 'It is enough to make one sick. I wonder I don't hate them or despise them,—they are such fools!'

'Millicent, you are out of temper,' said Mrs. Tracy. 'I wish you would not talk in that way. If anybody were to hear you——'

'I wish they could all hear me!' said Millicent, growing fiercer. 'Let's go and gamble at Homburg, mamma. I think I should like it. I think I should be lucky. Do I care for a stupid man to come and mumble over my hands? Bah!' cried Millicent,

looking at her own white, rose-tipped fingers, which Ben Renton, in his passion, had kissed. She looked at them with a certain disgust; but it was not Ben who disgusted her. Perhaps in that sudden fit of sullenness and temper she was nearer the purer world than ever she had been before in her life. Other men would kiss those hands,—other voices would tell that same tale in her ear,—while she sat and smiled and considered whether the suitor was rich enough; and, oh, heaven! why was it all? Because she was rather pretty, and had no heart nor womanly soul in her,—and because they were such fools!

Something like this Millicent thought as she sat with her elbows on the table, leaning her head in her hands. It was not that any impulse in favour of her 'sex' moved her altogether unintellectual, unspeculative being. She did not care a straw for the sex. Women were not perhaps 'such fools' as men in this particular way. Beyond that she had never thought on the subject. 'How nice it would be to have money of one's own!' she said; 'how nice it would be to win it over a table with no trouble,—and have all the excitement in the bargain! And if one lost, one could always begin again; whereas with men,—I don't believe I shall ever marry well,' she said, suddenly. 'If I marry at all it will be some adventurer who will take us in. Now, mamma, you'll remember what I say; I feel sure of it in my heart.'

'I never saw you in such a dreadful temper,' said her mother. 'Is it my fault that you go on at me? But I know what is the reason. You are in love with this fellow that has not a penny. I knew how it would be.'

'In love with him!' said Millicent. 'I wonder if I am in love with him! If I were I could not think him such a fool. Poor fellow! he's gone and robbed himself to send you to the baths, and you don't want the baths any more than he does. He ought to marry Mary Westbury and settle down, and get back his money. Most likely he would get back his money if he married Mary. And yet I think I should hate her too; but that would be for the sake of the Manor, and not for Ben. I had set my heart on the Manor, and that lovely house in Berkeley Square. Oh, don't speak to me! It's too bad! I can't bear it!' cried Millicent, suddenly hiding her face in her hands.

Thus confused, not knowing what was in her own mind, Millicent Tracy ran on, driving her mother wild. She did not know what she meant any more than Mrs. Tracy did. Acute disappointment, a kind of reverence and admiration of Ben, mixed strangely with a worldling's unfeigned astonishment and contempt at his simplicity, were in her mind. And there were other things besides. Regrets, not only for the house in Berkeley Square, but for the lost opportunity of perhaps catching at a different kind of life,—

longings quite undefined and inarticulate for something better,—self-disgust, self-pity,—all of which took form somehow in this bitter outburst of 'temper,' and supreme, unspeakable discontent. Was she, after all, 'in love' with Ben? But how could Millicent answer that question, not knowing what love was? Sometimes she was seized with a sort of passionate kindness for him, gratitude for his devotion, always mingled with half contempt, half pity. In short, she did not know what was in her, vaguely struggling for the mastery. Principles which, perhaps, if good influence had been possible,—if!—poor hypothesis, that hangs about the road to ruin! And yet who knows what tears the angels may weep over those blind strugglings of the human soul towards something better, or of what account they may be in the eyes of One kinder than all angels? Who knows what such agitation means, what hopes rise with it, and in what blank sickening of soul and darkening of the world it comes to an end?

Mrs. Tracy frankly had no idea what her daughter could mean. She concluded she was tired, and had got worried over her packing, and perhaps was sorry to lose her lover,—for her mother was less stoical than the daughter, and prized a lover *quand même*. So the natural thing to do was to get the poor child to bed, and give her some more wine and water, and finish the work herself. 'I will do that box for you,' she said; 'and remember, Millicent, you must be up

early. You want more sleep than I do.' She was up half the night herself, but did not mind it. It was a new campaign, and great thoughts were in the mother's mind. Thus the two prepared themselves to set out to spend poor Ben Renton's hundred pounds. He, too, slept little that night. When they got to the railway in the morning he was there, pale and feverish from want of sleep, and from excess of love and misery and hope. 'I am going to work for you,' he whispered, as he put Millicent into the carriage, with that look of anguish and passion and appropriation which made her somehow despise herself. His Millicent he called her once more, kissing her hand in open day, in sight of all the world. Oh, how could he be such a fool! And yet——

Thus Millicent Tracy passed away for the moment out of Ben's life; and he turned and walked from London Bridge all through the City in the cordial air of the May morning,—walked all the way to be alone and think of her in that crowd of London, before he should begin to work and win her,—with a hundred sweet pangs and stings of hope and suffering in his foolish heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

REACTION.

Everybody who has ever passed by that passage of life's poignant yet ordinary way, knows what a reaction there is when the one is gone who has thus occupied the first place in the thoughts of a man, —or woman either, for that matter. The moment she,—or he,—is gone, what a sudden quickening of energy, what a rush of all the faculties at the suspended work,—suspended for the sake of that engrossing presence. It had been natural to delay and muse the day before, recalling what sweet moments there might be in the past, imagining what might be in the future; but now, when all is over, with what an impulse the man works at his occupation, to fill the void, to hasten, if he could, the very movement of the earth, till the time of meeting again. Ben had a double motive at this crisis of his history. For the first time in his life he had actual work in hand, and the positive prick of necessity to drive him to it; and at the same time the hope of making,—of winning,—what?—his fortune,—Millicent,—a position in the

world,—all out of the chance that had fallen into his hands, of becoming assistant to an engineer on some little bit of American railway,—a profession of which he knew nothing. Knowledge, or skill, did not seem to him at this moment to count for much. It was a beginning a man wanted. Given that beginning, and what had he to do but follow it to the ultimate success which must come? It was in itself a foolish idea, common to the novice in every department; but perhaps in Ben's case it was less foolish than in that of most men, for it was his nature to hold by anything he took up desperately, until success of one kind or another rewarded him. He was intense in everything, taking what happened to him not lightly, but very seriously,—and such men are not apt to fail.

It was still early, when fresh from his long walk, and with his faculties all cleared up and awakened by the withdrawal of the presence which had absorbed him, he went to Hillyard's rooms to breakfast, as his friend had invited him to do. It was in one of those dingy parlours in Jermyn Street, which to so many young men are radiant with that freedom from domestic restraints, and privilege of having things their own way, which makes the long, unlovely street into a succession of palaces. Hillyard was sitting in his dressing-gown, over the same papers which he had carried to the club the night before. He was not less eager, not less excited than Ben,—or, indeed, it would be safe to say he was more excited. It was the end

only Ben was looking at; but the means, with which he was so much better acquainted than his assistant was,—the work itself, with its difficulties and obstacles, —had inflamed the mind of the adventurer. Of course there would be a great many difficulties,—there would be schemes to lead the line, one way or another, through this man's grounds or that man's, by this village or away from that; and Hillyard felt, with a little thrill of delight, that he was the man who could solve all these difficulties. It was not a work of the first importance, and yet he had never had such an opening before. He was to be chief engineer, and have everything in his hands. It was to an American, who had travelled home part of the way with him from Australia, that he owed this preferment; and the new chance was as precious to Hillyard as to Ben, though not perhaps of so much supposed importance in his life.

'I will run down and see my mother before I go,' he said; 'and I suppose, so will you: but we must meet at Liverpool on the 1st, and go out in the *Africa* If I do not keep the ball in my hands now I have got the thread, never trust me! Ben, you will think it strange when I say it, but it is this I have been trying for all my life.'

'I don't think it the least strange,' said Ben; 'though, if I were to say it was the same thing with myself——'

'Oh, you!' said Hillyard, 'you have not been so

many weeks on the world as I have been years; and, besides, you don't know what awaits you at the end of your probation. The money must come to some one,—and, even if it were divided among the three of you, your share would be more than enough to make a man happy;—whereas, for me this is the only chance in life.'

'I wonder what made you think of me,' said Ben, simply. 'It was very good of you. I was at the end of my resources and my hopes when I came out last night.' Hillyard looked at him keenly, and in spite of himself a little colour rose to Ben's face. 'It was kind of you to think of me,' he added hastily. 'I do not know,—had it been me——'

'That you would have been so forgiving?' said his friend; 'but I had done you no injury, Ben,—unless in taking you there. I suppose I must not ask what you have been doing with yourself all this time, nor what they are to you now, these—ladies?'

'The railway is a safer subject,' said Ben, clearing up his countenance with an effort; and then he added, after a little pause, 'Mrs. Tracy and her daughter have just gone off to one of the German baths.'

Hillyard eyed his companion with a curious look, restraining with difficulty the whistle of wonder which rose to his lips. He, much-experienced man, had seen through the mother and daughter at a glance; though, to be sure, he had been pre-instructed by his acquaintance with Fitzgerald Tracy. He could not under-

stand how it was that they had allowed Ben to slip through their fingers. 'If he had but a third of the property he would still be a prize,' he said to himself, casting a rapid engineering glance, as it were, along the line of his friend's life, and jumping over the intervening seven years. 'It was strange they should have let him go.' But the news of their departure explained how it was that he found Ben so disengaged, so ready to enter into his plans; and curious as he was, he could go no farther. A certain preoccupation that came into the young man's eyes, a wavering breath of colour on his face, and, at the same time, a strain of the lines about his mouth, his lips shutting, as it were, upon his secret, warned Hillyard off the unprofitable inquiry. He went back to the paper on the table, and began to describe the new life they would lead,—the voyage,—all the novel circumstances before them. He was himself so much of an adventurer that the sudden change of scene from St. James's to Ohio excited him, and gave a zest to his good fortune. But, curiously enough, this did not tell on Ben. His interest was in the work, and nothing else,—the work as a means to his end. The small excitement of the journey, or the new world which he was about to enter, Ben at this moment of exaltation contemplated almost with contempt. After all, crossing the Atlantic, except in the mere point of duration, was little more than crossing the Channel; and that naturally he would do without even thinking of it.

And what was America to him? There was not even the difficulty of a new language to contend with. He was not moved by that; at least, not now. What did excite him was the new profession he was going to enter; the necessity of knowing it and mastering the tool which was to carve out his fortune;—a necessity which Hillyard, to tell the truth, had not realised.

'I know all that is necessary for both of us,' he said, with a laugh. 'As for you, of course I consider it only a momentary occupation that will fill up your time while you are waiting. I should never have thought of offering it as more than that.'

'I am not waiting,' said Ben,—'I am beginning. Do you think I am going to build my expectations now upon my father's will, whatever it may be? How can I tell what it may be? Perhaps I am going about the very best way to disinherit myself completely. That is not my concern. I mean to work my own way. And if you can teach me enough to make me of real use——'

'I'll see to that,' said Hillyard, with a cordial grasp of his hand. But, nevertheless, the chief engineer was not quite so sure that he liked it as well on this ground. What he wanted had been a gentleman-assistant, whom to guide as he pleased, and of whom to boast a little, 'A fellow with I don't know how many thousands a-year to fall back upon.' He had rather intended to dazzle his American acquaintances with Ben; but a man who meant to learn his trade,

and practise it, might turn out rather a stumbling-block, and come in his master's way.

However, all was settled ere they parted, and Ben supplied with lists of books and instruments, and various unthought-of necessities which must be provided for somehow. His face lengthened perceptibly, as Hillyard perceived, when he heard of them, and he was for some minutes lost in thought. 'Considering how to raise the money,' his friend thought, but did not offer any help, wisely considering that Ben had friends much more able to help him than he—Hillyard—was. Perhaps he was rather pleased, on the whole, that the new-born professional zeal of his companion should receive a check in the bud. Ben went away very thoughtful with those lists in his pocket, and not very much more than his uncle's fifteen pounds to rely upon, but very resolute not to be damped in his ardour. It gave him plenty to think of for the rest of that day,—a day which was of feverish, interminable length, begun, as it was, hours too early. And Guildford Street had a gloom upon it as of the very grave when in the evening he went back to it.

They were to sail in the *Africa* on the 1st of June, so that he had but ten days for all his preparations. So close an approach to ruin had quickened Ben's powers, and his return to the realities of practical life, and to reasonable hopes and prospects, made the business of providing for his new wants less appalling

than had been that first tragical symptom of destitution, Mrs. Barton's little bill. There was no despair in the business now, but hope, and all the possibilities of active life. He had never been addicted to ornament, but yet had a little store of bijouterie which was of some value; and being no longer ashamed of his needs, he had the heart to go back to Messrs. Christie's, to inquire after his buhl and china, and drive a final bargain. The result of all these proceedings was, that Ben found enough in his pocket to stock himself with instruments and books for the profession he had taken up so hastily, substituting them for the pretty toys which had been the luxuries of his youth. To be sure, his Sèvres and his cabinets went for half, or less than half, their value; but of what value were such dainty articles to him at this point of his career? And as the natural spring of feeling came back, no doubt his new theodolite awakened a little pleasure in Ben's mind, which was still young, and could not but respond to the pleasant thrill of novelty in the long run. The very possession of the implements of a trade brought him nearer to practical work. He began to think such work was worth doing, after all, for its own sake; primitive work—making roads, building bridges—the first necessities of man. Had it not been the hackneyed iron way—the railroad, on which we have all heard so many big words wasted that its wonders have become a vulgar brag—Ben might actually have been seized with a young man's

passion for his work, and thought it superior to every other occupation under the sun. As it was, it loosed his lips, and restored him to the common intercourse of men. 'I am going to make a railway in America,' he said to the friends whom he no longer avoided at his club, and it was regarded as a very good joke among them. Some of them delivered a decided opinion—by Jove, that it was a capital idea. And the announcement of Ben Renton thus taking to work, after having been under a cloud, was like a brisk breeze blowing through the languid, gossiping community for one evening at least. He was able himself to see the humour of it, and discuss the subject freely in the course of a few days. He had touched the earth, like the giant in the story, and got new vigour. He was even able to go home—to that house which, in his first disgust, he had felt as if he never could enter again. He had found an independent standing apart from the past, in which he belonged to his family, and was now no more the embittered, disappointed, ruined heir of Renton, but a man erect in the world by himself, and with a work and life of his own.

CHAPTER XIV.

MARY'S OPINION.

It was on a beautiful afternoon, in one of the last days of May, that Ben Renton went back to his father's house. When he left it, he had not the slightest intention of separating himself so completely from his family; and yet, when he thought of it, he did not see what else he could have done. To go back now, when a definite beginning had been made in his career, and there was something decided upon—something to tell them of—was natural; but to have gone when his whole heart was full of Millicent Tracy, and no object beyond seeing her occupied his thoughts, would have been simply impossible. He felt that now, though he had not seen it at the time, and, feeling it, asked himself, with a flush of shame, how he could have ever hoped that she could love him—a man whose sole proof of his love was that he made himself useless for her sake! He was but on the threshold of Armida's garden, and already he blushed to think that he could have lingered there so long. But it was Armida's garden without the Armida. It

was not by her will that he had lingered. The moment he had opened his heart to her, had she not urged him forth to the brighter daylight and more wholesome life? Yes, or at least Ben thought she had done so—he forgot exactly how. That it was to supply her wants that he had been roused out of his dream, and that afterwards downright destitution had threatened him, did not occur to him now. It was all so recent that it was obscure to him, except that he had woke up and found his feet standing on firm earth again, after he had told his story into her ear; for which poor Ben's heart poured forth litanies of thanksgiving to his Lady of Succour. He was awakened, but he was not undeceived.

In a county so richly wooded as Berks, it is difficult to say which is more lovely, September or May. It was on a day of the St. Martin's summer that he had left Renton, when the great rich, lavish trees were but beginning to carry here and there a faint fiery mark of Autumn's 'burning finger.' Now they were all in their spring green, so new, so fresh, so silken in this year's garments, that it seemed impossible any autumn could ever change the soft, glossy texture of the young leaves. It was the last day's leisure he might have, except on the sea, for ever so long; and everything tempted him to enjoy it. He went as far as Cookesley by the railway, and then got a boat and went up the stream for the short remaining distance. The Renton woods were renowned—indeed,

uncomfortably so—parties going from far and near to visit them, and litter the leafy corners with signs of picnics. 'I can't say as they'll let you land, sir,' said the man from whom Ben hired his boat. 'The old lady's there for ever, and shuts herself up and spoils our trade.' Before he could take any notice of this speech, or do more than feel a natural amazement to find himself so soon a stranger in his own country, another boatman thrust aside the new-comer, who had not recognised the young master. 'I ask your pardon, sir; it's a new man I've got,' said the owner of the boat. 'He don't know no better, sir; and it's long since we seen any o' you gentlemen on the river. It do look a change.'

'What! not even my brother?' said Ben; and somehow it was a kind of comfort to his mind that Laurie had not been there.

'Mr. Frank do come by times,' said the boatman; 'but things is changed since last summer, when you gentlemen was allays about—you and your friends.'

'Yes, Tom, things are changed,' said Ben, as he pushed off from the bank. But somehow he did not feel so cast down about that change as he had been. Even the sight of the silvery, quiet river, which had not altered, and the trees drooping over it, every branch of which he seemed to know; and the bank that swelled into soft cliffs and wooded heights, as a sudden turn brought him within sight of Renton, did not bring up, as he had feared it would, any bitter

sense of injury and misfortune to his mind. Instead of being the heir and proprietor of all this, he was but Ben Renton, assistant to a railway man, going engineering without knowing how, away to the other end of the world. He said so to himself, and still, somehow, he did not feel bitter, which was curious. On the contrary, a soft sense of well-being stole over him. The river was as beautiful as ever, though he had no territorial rights over it—the woods rustled as softly in the sweet air of the spring; the sky was so bright above him, and hope, and energy, and resolution so strong in his breast! And Millicent! He had not known there was such a creature when he had last been there—reason enough to take away all the bitterness from his sensations now. Yet it was strange to see the house exactly as it used to be—the outer blinds dropped over Mrs. Renton's windows, her flowers arranged in their old order, her very sofa placed beneath the trees, as if she had been there a moment before. The only change Ben could see was in his mother's crape-covered dress and the dead white of the cap which surrounded her pretty, faded face. That was an improvement, though she did not think so; but it was the only visible sign of all the great events that had occurred at the Manor within this eventful year.

'Oh, Ben, I thought I had lost you!' cried his mother. 'I thought you were gone, too, like your father;' and she clasped her arms round her boy, and

wept on his shoulder. That was all the reproach she made to him. And Ben, as was natural, fell immediately into self-accusation. But in his heart he felt that it would have been impossible. He could not have kept coming and going to this familiar place while his mind was full of Millicent Tracy, and of nothing else in the world. It could not have been. He would have been driven to some violent step—he knew not what—had he come home in the midst of that time of enchantment. The contrast would have killed him, or made him desperate. It would have dispersed the rosy mists, and brought him back to sober day. Now that the spell was broken, he recognised, so far, its nature. And yet it was the magic of this spell which brought him home with a clear brow and unembittered heart, and defended him against all the suggestions of discontent. There was nothing of the injured man in his look, no consciousness of misfortune or downfall. Perhaps Mrs. Renton would not have been quick enough to see this; but there were another pair of eyes looking on—fairly bright ones, though not like Millicent's—which took it in at a glance, and wondered, and thought of Ben more highly than he deserved. Mary Westbury had been with her godmother all the winter through, giving many a thought to her cousins, to whom she had been as a sister, and saying many a prayer in her heart for poor Ben, the most hardly treated of all, whose wound was so deep that he had not the fortitude to come

home. Mary had been seized with a pang of fear when she saw her cousin, without any warning of his approach, come in, as of old times, by the window which opened on the garden. She expected to see him with a gloomy face, 'feeling it' so deeply as to make everybody else miserable. But, on the contrary, Ben's countenance was unclouded, and his demeanour that of a man satisfied with his own position. Mary's heart gave a little jump, and then settled into a pleasant glow of friendly warmth and soft agitation. After all, what a noble fellow he was! How fine it was of him to take to the change so kindly, and bear no malice! She left the mother and son by themselves at first, as soon as she could do it without ostentation, and went out, being excited, and walked about by herself in a very pleasant flutter of spirits. She was fond of Laurie, as everybody was, poor fellow; but Ben—Ben was different; and how noble of him to come home with that easy look, that unconstrained smile! Poor Mary made out a whole little romance as she came and went—an innocent, ingenuous creature, with summer in her face and in her heart—under the silken greenness of the lime-trees. No doubt he must have had a hard fight to subdue himself at first—not an easy, facile temper like Laurie—not a boy like Frank—but a man with settled plans of his own, and strong feelings, and an almost stern character. He had kept away until he had overcome himself. He had fought it out all

alone, struggling with his dragon, until at last he had been able to set his foot upon him; and then the victor had come with a smile on his face to see his mother. Such was Mary's fancy, knowing no better; and if she had vaguely admired, vaguely dreamed of her splendid cousin—the special hero of this drama—before, think with what a sudden thrill of enthusiasm, of dangerous approbation and applause, she regarded him now!

'They must have had their first talk out, and perhaps he will want something,' Mary said to herself after a while, and was turning to go in, when Ben met her,—coming to look for her, he said. It was Mrs. Renton's time for her sleep, and he had settled her pillows for her, and Mary was to have a holiday for once.

'We are to leave her alone for an hour or two,' said Ben; 'and, Mary, you must tell me all about her. You have been doing our duty while we have been,—pleasing ourselves. I have behaved like a brute to my poor mother.'

'Oh, no,' said Mary; 'we have never thought so. You are not like,—the rest of us. I always understood how it was. You were waiting till you could come as you ought,—as you are. I would not write to you, Ben. I thought, perhaps, it was better you should not hear from any of us; but I felt how it was.'

This little speech, which came out of Mary's

very heart, and was founded upon utter conviction, struck Ben with the wildest perplexity. Could she know how he had in reality spent his time? Could she be mocking him? But a glance at her face made that idea impossible. Mary believed in him somehow, though he did not even guess why. It gave him a little uncomfortable thrill of self-consciousness; and, what was still more strange, it gave him just a momentary amusement; but, on the whole, perhaps its effect was encouraging, and set him at his ease with his new companion.

'I have behaved like a brute,' he said again; 'though you, with your kind heart, make excuses for me; but, after all, it has been a little hard. A man cannot be twisted out of his socket and set into another without feeling it, Mary; though I do not dwell upon that now.'

'Oh, I know,' cried Mary, with all her heart; 'and there has never been a day that I have not thought of you, Ben; but you have overcome it nobly,' the girl cried in her enthusiasm, with tears in her eyes. Dear, little, soft, foolish creature!—what did she mean?

'Put on your hat and come down with me to the river,' said Ben. 'My mother says you have no variety, nor even air. And she is to be left by herself till dinner. Come, and I will row you up to the Swan's Nest. Do you remember?'

'Do I remember!' cried Mary, rushing into the

house for her hat. Her heart beat as it had never beat before in its life. Ben to recollect the old story of the Swan's Nest! It was natural that Laurie, her own playfellow, should think of all those childish follies,—but Ben! She came rushing out again, putting on her hat as she came, not to keep the prince waiting. If poor Mary had but known the use that had been made of her name six months before in Guildford Street, or why it was that her lordly cousin was so gracious to her now!

But, meanwhile, they went very pleasantly together down the winding road under the trees to the river. Both of them, in their different ways, had that enthusiasm for the beauty of their home which is common to well-educated young English people, not fine enough to be *blasés*. Mary,—to whom it was a delight at any time to approach the beautiful river near which she had been born, by this winding woodland road, shaded by those great trees under which her mother and her mother's mother had watched it gliding past,—was this day wrapt in a tender content which gave additional beauty to everything around. There was splendour in the grass and glory in the flower wherever she set her foot on that day of days; and when the humblest things were thus enhanced, what was it to float forth on the blessed river, all encompassed by summer light, and the sweetest sounds and sights of nature! Even to Ben, pre-occupied as he was, there was a

pleasure in her gentle company, in the familiar home-look of everything, that penetrated his heart in spite of himself. The sense of life had risen strongly in him after his voluntary banishment. The unusual exercise, the soft gliding of the water round the boat, the glimmer and murmur of the stream, and Mary's pleasant face,—not beautiful, like the other face he was thinking of,—her soft talk and tremulous, gentle laughter, her happiness and ingenuous confidence, all soothed and consoled him. It would have been rapture with that other; now, it was not rapture, but a certain soft content. She was a good girl, so kind to his mother, like a sister to them all,—a dear, little, sweet-voiced, bright-faced creature. Ben would have defended her against all the world; he would have pitched into the river, without a moment's hesitation, any man who harmed her so much as by a thought;—he looked at her with a certain affectionate observation and loving-kindness,—poor Mary! and yet with his heart full of that other,—possessed by the enchantress all the time.

'You are looking a little pale,' he said, with that frank, affectionate interest in her; 'but you must not let my mother keep you too much with her. She does not mean to be selfish, poor dear. You must run out and see your friends, Mary, and get your roses back.'

'He cares for my roses then,' said mistaken Mary

to herself, with a flush of shy pleasure which restored them to her cheeks. But,—'Indeed, I am quite well, Ben; and I like to be with godmamma. How strange you should tell me she is not selfish,—I who know her so well!'—was what she said.

'Perhaps better than I do,' said Ben. 'I think women know each other best;' and he stopped short with sudden gravity, and perhaps just a lingering doubt of what Mary's opinion might be of another. He meant to ask her, but somehow he was embarrassed about it. It could wait for another time, at least till they had finished their row. And they began to talk of family matters, the familiar talk which is so pleasant in its mild interest;—how old Sargent was having it all his own way with the garden; how Willis the butler was tyrannical to the ladies; the little *mots* of the house, and its opinions upon things in general. And then they reached the Swan's Nest, which Mary had made a child's romance about once like little Ella in Mrs. Browning's poem. The two knew every water-lily and every flag, and the separate droop of every willow-branch at that fairy nook.

'I did not think you would have remembered,' Mary said in her shy delight. And they turned and floated down again with the oars laid silent in the boat, and the sweet water plashing softly with a quiver and ripple of sound and sunshine, so twined together that they seemed but one, about its tiny

bows. Even Ben was hushed, and charmed, and softened by the exquisite tender stillness and brightness. Fancy what poor Mary must have been, shut up so long in Mrs. Renton's shaded room, with one day of delight thus dropped unawares into her life!

They had reached the bank again, and were wandering slowly up the ascent towards the house before the charm was broken. It was just as they turned and stood still by mutual consent,—as everybody did who knew that view,—to look down upon the river from between the two great beeches, which framed it in, and made an ideal picture of the lovely reality. There was an opening below among the trees, and a silvery nook, with an island just appearing, a goodly bank opposite with groups of sleek cattle, and in the distance Cookesley Church with its ivied tower. The view was always perfect just there; a little 'bit' of nature's own composition, in which the trees, and cows, and the very swans, posed themselves by instinct, as the most exquisite art would have posed them. Many a time afterwards Mary Westbury looked at that scene, and felt again the sudden twang of the bowstring and the quiver of the arrow in her heart. That was the metaphor under which she represented it to herself.

'You have never been out of Berks, have you, Mary,' said her cousin, 'you home-keeping girl? —you were educated close by here, were you not?'

'What people call educated,' said Mary, with her soft, happy laugh. 'I never learned anything. It was at Thornycroft, not more than ten miles off. But it is so odd that you should remember, Ben.'

'Do you recollect a Miss Tracy there?' said Ben, with a slight breathlessness,—the road was so steep; was that the cause?

'Miss Tracy? Oh, you mean Millicent. What! do you know her?' cried Mary, turning round upon him. He was taken by surprise, and perhaps his face betrayed him. At all events, she grew pale in a moment, poor child, and leaned her arm against one of the beech-trees. That was the moment at which she often thought the string of the bow twanged and the arrow came home.

'I have met her,' said Ben;—'that is, I have seen a good deal of her; and she seemed to be fond of you.'

'Millicent Tracy!' repeated Mary, with a little tremulous movement. 'Oh, I don't think she was fond of me.'

'You do not seem, at least, to have been fond of her,' said Ben, with a little pique in his tone.

'She was not in my set,' said Mary, plucking up a little spirit. 'We were younger. She was so pretty,—oh, so pretty! We all thought there never was any one like her. Is she as pretty now?' Mary asked, with an attempt at interest; but her tone was not so eager and hearty as her words.

'She is not pretty at all;—she is beautiful,' said Ben, his passion betraying itself in spite of him. And then they stood silent, looking down on the river, and for some minutes not another word was said. It was Ben who was the first to speak. The man was angry, after the fashion of men, with the girl who up to this moment had been so sweetly ready to adopt what tone he pleased to give the conversation. 'I seem to have been unfortunate in my subject,' he said, turning abruptly to go in. 'Miss Tracy, I see, cannot have been a favourite among the girls at Thornycroft. She was too beautiful, I suppose.'

'Indeed, no,' said Mary, with a little indignation, following him. 'We were all very proud of her beauty. Though I don't think we thought of beauty. We thought she was very pretty,—oh, so pretty! No girl at Thornycroft was ever so nice-looking; and nice too,' she continued with a hesitating attempt to please him. 'I always did think that she was nice, too.'

'That was very good of you,' Ben said, with a little scornful laugh; but Mary was silent again, and grew frightened, and felt as if her heart would break. What was Millicent Tracy to him? his cousin thought. If this was all he had come home for, only to ask about such a girl as that!—not for his mother at all, nor for Mary, nor for the sake of home. The idea so disturbed her temper and patience that she

had some difficulty in keeping the ready tears from falling; and this, of course, was going a great deal too far, for it was not for the sole purpose of asking about Millicent that Ben had gone home.

From that moment a cloud fell over the shining day,—not in reality, for the sun shone as bright as ever,—but upon the cousins, as they climbed the winding path. All its exquisite greenness and intervals of sunshine and shade,—all the play of light and colour about, the silvery gleam of the river, the soft, full verdure behind,—were lost upon them. A jar had struck into the magical harmony of the summer air. Mary, after the first moment, recovering herself from that pang of mortification and disappointment, began to struggle with herself for something to say. What could she say? Millicent had not been popular at Thornycroft. She had turned the heads of the young masters, and being new to the delights of conquest, had encouraged them to make fools of themselves, and had scandalised the entire community. She had tempted the curate, who was the brother of Miss Thorny, the head of the establishment at Thornycroft, into a flirtation, and broken his heart; and in consequence of this feat had left the school abruptly. 'Perhaps she was not so very much to blame,' Mary said to herself as she went painfully along by Ben's side, watching his averted face. 'Men are such fools;'—unconsciously she repeated in her innocence that sentiment which was the fruit of

Millicent's experience;—'they will do anything for beauty.' Probably it was their own doing. Could it be Millicent's fault if they went crazy about her lovely face? Thus the good girl reasoned herself into tolerance. She made a great many little feints to call Ben's attention,—cleared her throat, dropped her gloves, tried what she could, by every innocent artifice which occurred to her, to get him to resume the interrupted conversation;—but Ben, with something of the brutality of a big brother mingling, as was inevitable, with his brotherly kindness, marched on and took no notice. She had to make a faltering beginning herself without any aid from him.

'Ben,' she said, 'you are not to think I did not like Millicent, or that she was not very nice. I daresay it was not her fault. Everybody made a fuss about her wherever she went;—she was so very pretty. I don't think it could have been her fault.'

'Being pretty?' said Ben, with the sneer that women hate.

'You know I did not mean that,' said Mary, injured. 'I think it must have been the gentlemen's own doing. Mr. Thorny was very silly to think she would ever have had him. I am sure that must have been his foolishness. She so pretty and so clever, and he only a common curate, you know;—just like other curates, nothing particular about him. It must have been his own fault.'

'I have not the advantage of knowing what you

refer to,' said Ben, with the haughtiest assumption of indifference, though his temper had taken fire and his pride was all in arms. A curate,—a common curate,—to have been associated anyhow, by any means whatever, with Millicent! In his heart he was furious, though he managed to keep some outward calm.

'Oh, it was nothing,' said Mary, faltering, and feeling that her attempt at making up had not been successful,—'only they said it was that that threw him into a consumption. But it was not her fault,—it might have happened to any of us,' said Mary, with a sudden blush; for had it not fallen to her lot, though she was no flirt and not even a beauty like Millicent, to inflict a passing wound without knowing it on a curate of her own?

Then Ben laughed, but it was a very unpleasant laugh. 'When a lady frowns a man can but die,' he said. 'How could he do less? I suppose that is what you mean?'

'Oh, Ben!' cried Mary, with a hopeless appeal to his sense of justice. But he only shrugged his shoulders and began to whistle, and walked the rest of the way at such a pace that it was all she could do to keep up with him. Not another word did he say to her on the subject, nor did he pay any attention to her little faltering speeches. He whistled, which was very rude of him; and, after a while, Mary, who had a spirit of her own, grew indignant, and, if she did not

whistle, did what was equivalent,—she took up the air he was whistling, and sang it softly with a pretty little voice. 'I did not know you had been fond of music, Ben,' she said with a laugh; but it cost her a good cry when she got into her own room. Ben, who was so superior, who had borne his trial so nobly, who was going to work like a hero,—Ben, who had always been, more than she knew, her own ideal of man,—to think that Millicent Tracy with her pretty face——! 'Why, even Laurie would have seen through her!' Mary said to herself, and wept with the poignant prick of self-knowledge, which gives the chief bitterness to such a discovery,—not self-esteem, but that indignant, sorrowful, honest insight which, on such a provocation, reveals one's worth to oneself in pain and not in vanity. 'Having known me, to decline on a range of lower feelings and a narrower heart than mine!' Mary did not say this, any more than Ben had said of whose image his heart was full; but she felt it with a sharp mingling of pride and humiliation. 'Not that it can be anything to me,' she added aloud, to save her own credit, as it were, with herself; and put on her prettiest dress, and was very cheerful and amusing at dinner, when the mother was rather melancholy and had need of enlivenment. Ben's spirits had flagged, partly with the shock his pride had received, and partly with the associations which began to creep over him. The dinner-room, in which it was so strange to take his father's place; the

old servants, who were connected so completely with the old time; all the routine of the house, in which nothing was changed but one thing,—affected the young man in spite of himself. He had been defrauded, as it were, out of his natural grief for his father; and now the mute eloquence of the vacant place seized upon him. So good a father up to the last moment; so kind,—even at the last moment filled with special compunction for Ben! Mr. Renton's son felt, almost for the first time, how much wisdom, and support, and guidance, how much tender affection and watchful care, were lost to him. When his mother, faltering, spoke, as to the boy she still felt him to be, of 'your dear papa,' Ben fell back into the boy she thought him, and soft tears came into his eyes. Perhaps the sadness did him more good than his former mood of satisfaction; but it somewhat defeated his cousin Mary, who meant to be gay, and prove to him that his enthusiasm for Millicent Tracy was nothing to her. On the contrary, the soft-hearted, sympathetic creature turned her pleasant eyes upon him, all shining with tears when his change of mood became visible, and forgave him his Millicent, and comforted herself that it was but a fancy; and they were all very affectionate together, and somewhat pathetic, with that common grief behind them and the common pang of parting before them, for the rest of the night.

Yet when Ben went to his room, he paused on his way at the great window on the staircase, from which

all the noble gardens of the manor, and the west wing, and the line of trees which overhung the river, were visible, all ghostly and mysterious in the moonlight, and stood looking out with a sudden flutter at his heart. His thoughts were not at home, nor of the past. The question which suddenly flashed across his mind was, Should he ever bring her here to be the mistress of it all? It was the first time he had ever allowed himself to speculate upon the distant future at the end of his seven years' probation. Mrs. Renton had gone to bed weeping, yet consoled by her son's presence and sympathy; and Mary was taking herself to task, in her maiden retirement, for having been hard upon poor Ben; while Ben stood at the window looking out on the moonlight, forgetting the very existence of these two, and asking himself, with a thrill that ran through all his veins, Should he ever bring her here? Mary's hesitating story, her faint praise, her deprecation of all intention to blame, even the curate,—contemptible shadow!—angry as they had made him at the moment, had faded from his thoughts. He seemed to see her in her stately beauty coming across the lordly lawn. How lovely she was! Even the silly school-girls, unimpassioned, feminine creatures, impervious to that influence, were compelled to acknowledge it. What if she might stand with him here by this very window, and look out on the moonlight some other night?

This was how Ben Renton went out upon the

world,—in charity with his own people, even with his father who had been so hard upon him; and feeling, after all, that at five-and-twenty a man, even when disinherited, with work in his hands to occupy him, fresh air to breathe, and novel scenes to see, and energies to exercise in a big spacious world where there was room to do something, had no particular occasion to quarrel with life or fate. The thread of actual work, as soon as he got it into his hands, had enabled him to trace his way out of all the morbid labyrinths of solitary musing. Armida's garden was left behind for ever; but the witch, who had enchanted him and possessed herself of his life, was so far from suffering by the change, that she had developed in his imagination into a white angelic woman, worthy reward of all labour. Poor, foolish Ben! And yet it could not have been anything but a high nature which emerged from that six months' mist of self-inspection, bitterness, idleness, and insane passion, with at least a true sense of the realities of his position, and a true love in his heart.

And thus equipped he disappears from us for seven years into the vast and troubled world.

CHAPTER XV.

KENSINGTON GORE.

Laurence Renton's state of mind when he left the Manor immediately after his father's death was very different from that of his brother Ben. He was a different man altogether, as will be seen. He had that unconscious natural generosity of temper and unselfishness of disposition which is more a woman's quality than a man's. By instinct, he put himself, as it were, on the secondary level, and considered matters in general rather as they affected other people. It was no virtue in him, and he did not even know it. Such a disposition could scarcely have existed with a passionate or energetic mind; and Laurie was not energetic. He could no more have absorbed himself in a foolish passion as Ben had done, than he could have set to work with the practical sense of his younger brother. He was lazy Laurence under all circumstances; fond of philosophising over his mischances, taking most things very quietly; and he had a faculty of contenting himself with what was pleasant in whatsoever aspect it might

come, which is the very death of ambition in every shape and form. He had occupied some rooms at Kensington, with a pretty studio attached to them, in his father's lifetime, when money was plentiful. No wonder Mrs. Westbury had mourned over him, and denounced so luxurious a mode of bringing up. He was of course a younger son, and had no pretensions to lead an idle life. Providence seemed indeed to have indicated a public office, or some such moderate occupation, which would have left him time for his favourite dilettantism and required no particular activity or exercise of intellect. But Laurence had been a perplexing subject to deal with all his life. He had been one of those trying boys who have no particular bent one way or another. He was a bright, intelligent, indolent, inaccurate lad, utterly incapable of dates or facts in general, but full of social qualities, — good-natured, tender-hearted, ready to do anything for anybody. And then he had travelled a little, and drifted among an artist set, and from that day hoped and imagined himself capable of art. He had always had a certain facility in drawing, and everybody knows how easy it is to glide into the busy dawdling, the thousand pleasant trifles of occupation which fill the time of an amateur. It seemed to Laurie, as it has seemed to many another, that a life made beautiful by that faculty of discovering beauty which the humblest artist prides himself on possessing,—and the privilege of claiming

a kind of membership with a noble craft, — was superior to the loftiest stool and the most dignified desk even in a Foreign Office. He was proud to call himself, as he often did, 'a poor painter;' and, alas! a poor painter in the literal sense of the words Laurie was. He had no genius, poor fellow! only a tender, amiable, pleasant, little talent, which would have led him into verses had his turn been literary. His friends and relations would have been more deeply shocked still had they known what a toss-up it was whether Laurie's amateurship had taken the literary or artistic turn,—but fortunately it was the latter; and as he made pretty little sketches, and had given them away with charming liberality, and harmed nobody, it was only the high moralists, such as his Aunt Lydia, who found any fault with what he was fond of calling his 'trade.' And there was this to be said in his favour, that he had no expensive tastes, and that, given this mode of idleness, which he called work, Laurie's was about as harmless a life as a young man could lead; — 'especially as he will never need to maintain himself,' people had been used to say.

All this, however, had changed for him as for his brother. Even Laurie's modest establishment could not be kept on two hundred a-year; and he had been used to be liberal, and manage his money matters with an easy hand, always ready to help a comrade in distress. So that it was absolutely necessary for him now to

work. He went into his Kensington rooms with feelings not unlike those which moved Ben when he made his melancholy inventory of his things at the Albany. There were accumulations of all kinds in the place. Bits of old carpet, bits of 'drapery,' bits of still life, a little china, a little of everything; and a north light, perfect of its kind, in the studio. He had fitted it all up to suit himself, with a hundred handy devices, — stands for his portfolios, velvet-covered shelves, all sorts of nooks for the artistic trumpery which is supposed to be necessary in a studio; and the tiny little sitting-room into which the studio opened had a queer, little, round bow-window, looking into the Park, which was something like a box at the opera without the music. All the world streamed under Laurie's bow-window coming and going, and many a nod and pleasant smile reached the artist,—save the mark!—in his velvet coat, as he came now and then from behind his fresh flowers to look out upon the fashion and beauty, sometimes with a palette in his hand or maul-stick, on which he leaned as he looked out. It gave him a certain pleasure to pose in this professional way. Perhaps it was as well for the consistency of Laurie's philosophy that it was September when he came back to Kensington Gore. He went and sat down in his bow-window, and nobody passed,—nobody except the unknown people who stream about London streets all day long, and of whom no one takes any notice. No

doubt there were human figures enough; but the trees were very shabby in the Park, and the grass, as far as he could see, was burnt to a pale yellow, and two nursemaids and one Guardsman had all the expanse to themselves. In these circumstances, perhaps, it was easier to take leave of his pleasant little hermitage. He sat in his window and looked carelessly out, and mused on the change. A pot of China asters, showy enough, yet betokening the winter which approached, replaced all the roses and bright geraniums which generally filled the stand. The season was over, and this kind of thing was over, and the first part of life.

Well! he said to himself,—and no particular harm either. Life was not Kensington Gore. Many admirable artists had lived and died in Fitzroy Square; and there was Turner in Queen Anne Street,—not that one would choose to be like Turner. After all, it was but for half the year that Kensington Gore was desirable. When people were out of town, what did it matter? And then a smile crossed his face as it occurred to him that henceforward he was not likely to be one of those who go out of town. Looking down, his vacant eye caught the succession of figures passing along the pavement; many very well-dressed, well-looking people, not having the least appearance of being outcasts of society. And yet such they must be, or else they would scarcely be there in such numbers in September. Then he went

on to reflect what heaps of people he himself knew who lived in London all the year round, with the exception of a month or two, or a week or two, somewhere for health's sake. Most painters were of this class. It was but identifying himself more entirely with the art he had chosen; and in that point of view it would be good for him. An amateur is never good for anything, thought Laurie; but a man who has to devote himself to his work without any vain interruptions has a chance to make something of it. Then a gleam of pleasant and conscious vanity, for which he smiled at himself, flitted over his meditations. He could almost see the people pausing before a picture in the Academy,—or two or three pictures for that matter,—why not?—when he had nothing else to do,—and telling each other how the painter had been maltreated by fortune, and how this was the result of it,—hard work and success, and substantial pudding and sweetest praise;—ay, and a reputation very different from that of the dilettante who strolled from his studio to the bow-window, and looked out in his professional costume to receive the salutations of the ladies. 'There is poor Laurie Renton, who has been so foolish as to take to art and nonsense; but, fortunately, he will never need to be dependent on it.' That was what the ladies used to say as they passed. How different it would be when they stood before the great picture in the Academy, and read the name in the catalogue.

He saw the expression on certain faces as they read that name. 'What, Laurie Renton! who would have thought he could ever have been good for anything?' This was what Laurie called thinking over his changed affairs.

There was one drop of bitterness, however, in his cup which had not been in Ben's. We have said that when Mrs. Westbury visited Laurie in his room on the night of his father's funeral, there were some little notes lying on his table, over which he was making himself miserable, with his face hidden in his hands. It is not necessary to mention her name, as she has, unfortunately, nothing to do with this story; but the fact was that there had been somebody whose little notes made Laurie's heart beat. They had been the simplest kind of letters:—'Dear Mr. Renton, —Mamma bids me say that she will be very glad if you will come to dinner on Thursday;'—nothing more: and yet he had tied them up very carefully together and preserved them,—the foolish fellow,— as if they were pearls and diamonds.

It was one of those might-have-beens, which are in every life. She had very good blood, and very sweet looks, and that perfect homely training of an English girl which people try to persuade us has vanished from the world,—had we not eyes of our own to see otherwise. She knew no Latin nor Greek, but she was more brightly intelligent than her brother, for instance, who was a fellow of All

Souls. And she had not a penny; and if Laurie Renton had come in, as seemed likely, to as much money as would have produced him 1500*l.* or even 1000*l.* a-year——!

Alas! that is how things happen in this life. Laurie was not the kind of man, like Ben, to dare the impossible and keep his love at all hazards. He knew well enough it would not do. Years must pass before he painted that picture at which his friends should stare in the Academy; and in the interval no doubt some one would come in who could give her everything she ought to have, and for whom her sweet face would brighten, and not for him. This had been the first thought that had occurred to Laurie when his father's will was read. He had seen her standing in her bridal veil beside some one else, five minutes after the sound of the lawyer's voice had died on his ear. It had wrung his heart, but he had said, 'God bless her!' all the same. Never word of love had passed between them. When the returning season brought her back to the little house in Mayfair, she would wonder, perhaps sigh, perhaps ask what had become of Mr. Renton? But by that time Laurie knew his little boat would have been so long gone down under the sea that there would not be even a circle left on the smooth, treacherous water. It might cost her a little gentle expectation or disappointment,—a wistful look here and there for the face that was not to be seen again.

Unselfish as he was, Laurie hoped it would cost her as much as that; but it would not cost her more. And long before the seven years were out or his great picture exhibited in the Academy—to which, perhaps, her friends would object as much as to his poverty—she would be some one else's wife. And it would be better for her. She had always been too good for Laurie. Some one who could give her rank, wealth, whatever heart could desire——! Poor Laurie's heart contracted with a sudden pang, and forced the moisture to his eyes. He was only four-and-twenty, poor fellow! But it was to be so. Not his the force or the passion to resist fate. It was one of the might-have-beens which gave so strange, so shadowy a character to this existence. Strange to stand amid the unalterable laws of nature and see what caprice moves the fate of the chief of nature's works. If Aunt Lydia had held her peace! If Mr. Renton had not changed his mind! We are such stuff as dreams are made of! Laurie said to himself as he turned from the scentless China asters in his window and the empty Park, and this concluded phase of life.

But still things might have been worse. This overthrow might have happened a year ago, at the moment when Laurie had pledged all his credit, and given all his money to Geoffrey Sutton,—poor old fellow!—after the brigands sacked his little villa up

on Lake Nemi, and took everything he had in the world. When old Geoff was going about, wild and penniless, girt round with pistols, to revenge his loss, without thinking that his life might go instead of Masaccio's, and that nobody would be left to pay his friends at home! What a business it would have been had this happened then! But in the meantime Geoff's old uncle had been so obliging as to die, and all was right again. Or had it occurred that time when Laurie took his last twenty pounds out of the bank to send Harry Wood to Rome to nurse his lungs and pursue his studies! Fortunately at this moment there was nothing in hand to make matters worse than they were by nature, which Laurie reflected was the greatest good luck,—a chance which he scarcely deserved, imprudent as he was. So that on the whole, except for the necessity of leaving Kensington Gore, it would not make much difference. That he should feel a little, of course;—everything was so handy, so nice, so bright, and Mrs. Brown understood his ways. But after all, what did it matter where a man lived? A good light to paint by, any sort of a clean room to sleep in, and a friendly face now and then to look in upon his work. Of that last particular he was always certain. Indeed, Laurie was fully aware that among his artist friends he was likely to be rather more than less popular when he ceased to be a 'swell' and amateur.

Such were the young man's thoughts when he began to feel the ground under his feet again after his overthrow. Poor Ben! how hard it would be upon him! but after all for himself it was no such terrible business. Art is long; and so, for that matter, is life too, at four-and-twenty, or at least appears so, which comes to much the same thing. Laurie for his part would have been very glad to have stood by his brother and given him all the succour that brotherly sympathy can give, had the elder been so inclined; but, to tell the truth, Ben had been morose when they parted, and had requested to to be left alone, and that no attempt should be made to condole with or help him until he himself took the initiative. Laurie went and made a sketch of the three fairy princes setting out on their travels, to solace himself when he had 'thought over' as above for a sufficiently long period. Such little sketches were the best things he ever did, his friends said. There was young Frank marching in advance on a noble steed, with the sun shining on his helmet and all his gorgeous apparel; and Laurie himself following after with his easel on his shoulder, his portfolios, half-finished canvases, palettes, colour-boxes, and accompanying trumpery hung about his person. Ben came last, with his coat buttoned, and his face set against the wind. Poor Ben! it was more difficult to make out how he would take it than

how it would affect the others. Thus Laurie, even in the first shock, made light of his own share. There were three beautifully distinct paths on which the three were setting out. In Frank's case the road was continuous, and led through sundry stormy indications of battle, and fantastic,—supposed,—Indian towers, to where a coronet hung in mid air,—the infallible reward, as everybody knows, of energetic young soldiers who leave the Guards for the line. In Laurie's own path, the glorious cupolas of the National Gallery, with laughing little imps fondly embracing each pepper-pot, closed the vista. These were easy of execution; but what was to be the end of Ben's painful way? It lay up hill in his brother's sketch, a perfect alp of ascent. But on the height, though so austere, stood Renton Manor in full sunshine, at one side; while on the other appeared a stately Tudor interior, full of gentlemen in their hats, where some one with the features of the pedestrian below was addressing the interested audience. 'For of course that is how it will end,' Laurie said to himself; and yet his heart melted, poor foolish fellow, over the rocks and glaciers in his brother's way.

'And I wonder which of them will meet the White Cat,' Laurie said to himself, hanging over his drawing-block with his pencil in hand, giving here and there a touch; 'Frank, perhaps, as becomes a

soldier; but I wish it might be Ben.' And then he bent over his own part of the sketch, and did something to the imps on the National Gallery and sighed. With that soft ache in his heart, poor fellow! enchanted primrose-paths were not for him. So the next thing he did was to plant a lovely little ideal figure on the rocks through which his elder brother was to make his way, beckoning to Ben and cheering him on. That was how it should be. He spent a great deal of time over his drawing, and took pleasure in the comic burdens which were suspended from his own person,—brushes dangling at his heels, a lay figure suspended over his shoulder, and a little dog barking in amaze at the wonderful apparition. He laughed over it just as he had sighed. Fate was good to Laurie, who could find some way of extracting a little pleasure, a little amusement, out of everything. It was quite late in the afternoon when he put his drawing-block aside, placing it on the mantel-piece, where the drawing might catch his eye whenever he returned, and took his hat and went out. He was going to ask advice of old Welby, an old R.A. of his acquaintance, as to what course of study he should adopt, and what would be best for him in general, in the way of art. 'And there's the padrona as well, who understands a fellow better than Welby,' he added to himself as he went out; and perhaps that was why he put one of Mrs. Brown's

monthly roses,—for lack of a better,—in his button-hole as he passed. For he was a young fellow who was fond of the society of women, and liked to appear well in their eyes, notwithstanding that ache in his heart.

CHAPTER XVI.

WELBY, R.A.

Old Welby, R.A., lived in No. 375 Fitzroy Square. He had lived there or thereabouts all his life; but his immediate dwelling-place was one which he had not occupied for above a year or two, and to which he had come out of charitable, friendly motives which he would have denied reluctantly had he been accused of them. It was poor Severn's house, and Severn's widow never would have been able to keep it but for old Welby, who had suddenly become dissatisfied with his rooms, and discovered that the ground-floor of 375 was the very thing he wanted. The old gentleman was very well off and very famous; but he was a bachelor, and had never aspired to the honour and worry of a house of his own. He was a thorough painter, steeped to the lips in that theory of life which is more destructive of social follies and more wedded to liberty than any other. Of all things in this world there was nothing he cared so much for as art. He loved the artist and the artist hand wherever he met with them, though

he did not always display his feeling. Mere intelligence, even, when it was bright and genuine, the uncultivated eye that perceived an effect, though in utter ignorance of its why or wherefore, pleased him; but he was very little interested in fine people, or about enthusiasts who would come and rave to him of his lovely pictures. 'And had never found out the meaning of one of them, sir,' he would say with a little snort of indignation. He had had his day of society, and had been much petted as an original as well as a great painter, but had borne his distinction very soberly, with a head it proved impossible to turn; and now having surmounted that ordeal, he lived as he liked living, seeing such people as he liked, going out when he pleased, dining when he pleased, dressing according to his own taste, with an utter disregard of anybody's opinions. He had taken to Laurie as he seldom took to young men, and it was of him that our amateur went to seek counsel, —one of the most foolish things, had Laurie but known it, that he ever did in his life.

The ground-floor of the mansion in Fitzroy Square consisted of the dining-room in the front, an immense dark room with sober-toned walls and great pictures in heavy old frames, which was Welby's sitting-room. The room beyond, which opened into it by folding doors, was a bare, scantily-furnished ante-chamber, where strangers, and models, and Philistines in general, were sent to wait his pleasure: beyond that

again, with a separate passage of its own, was the studio, which was not a part of the original building, but had been added to it by one of the many artists who had inhabited the house. Still farther on, following the plan of the original dwelling-place, was Mr. Welby's bedroom, which was not very large, and looked into the dingy, smoky London garden, with a few trees in it which made your fingers black when you touched them, but which, nevertheless, flourished and threw out their fresh leaves every spring as if they had been in the depths of the country. It was Forrester, Mr. Welby's man, who was almost as great an authority on art as himself, who opened the door to Laurie with frank salutation, and showed him into the studio, where his master was. 'Mr. Renton, sir, come to see you,' he said with the pleasant confidence that he was making an agreeable announcement, and lingered a moment in the room to shake down the contents of a portfolio which bulged inharmoniously and wounded his sensitive eye. 'I told you, sir, as them Albert Doorers you went and bought was too big for any of the books,' he said with a gentle reproach. 'Then go and order some bigger,' retorted his master; and with this little episode Laurie's salutations were broken. Mr. Welby was not at work. He was looking over some tiny little scraps of drawings which were worth a great deal more than their weight in gold, carefully examining a frayed edge here and there, mounting them with his own hands,

caressing them as if they had been his children. The studio was a great, solemn, stately place, not like Laurie's little shed. There was a rich old mossy Turkish carpet on the floor, and wonderful pieces of old art-furniture worth a fortune in themselves. Two or three easels stood about, one bearing a picture, set there clearly for purposes of exhibition; and another honoured by a pure white square of canvas without a line upon it. The picture was not Welby's own. He worked but little now-a-days, and that little only when the inspiration was upon him. It was by an old Italian master little known, who was the R.A.'s special pet and protégé. He had been pointing out its beauties to some bewildered visitors only that morning, who would much rather have seen a Welby, even in the most fragmentary condition, than the curious, quaint Angelichino which required a very profound artistic taste to understand. Nobody knew whether old Welby's admiration for his pet master was genuine, or was his way of jeering at a partially educated amateur public. That and his pure white canvas were his favourite show-pieces, and these accordingly were the most prominent objects in the studio when Laurie went in. The painter himself was a little man with refined features, but many wrinkles; his eyes were very keen and bright under the shaggy mobile eyebrows with which he almost talked, and the colour on his cheek was as fresh as a winter apple. His hair was almost white, and so was his beard, but yet he

was not old. He had a black velvet bonnet on his white locks,—not a skull-cap, but a round bonnet such as the Dutch painters wear in their pictures,—and a velvet coat; and was not above adding,—it was apparent,—a skilful touch to the picturesqueness of his appearance by means of dress. Such was the man who held out both his hands to Laurie, with a half foreign warmth mingled with his English calm. 'Ah, Renton, I am glad to see you,' he said; 'a young fellow like you in September is a rarity: and I wanted some one to look at my little Titians. I picked them up in Venice for an old song. There is where you boys should go. Such lights, such reflexions! Look here, my dear fellow,—what do you say to that?'

Laurie gazed and applauded as was expected of him; but somehow, though he had been moderately cheerful before, the sight of this life which was no life filled him suddenly with an uncalled-for depression. To go wild about a scrap of paper with some pencilled lines made how many hundred years ago, and never to think of the lives getting wrecked, the hearts getting broken round you! This was what Laurie suddenly thought,—with great injustice, as was natural,—and felt disposed to walk away again on the spot without betraying the troubles of which the other was unconscious. 'The padrona would have known before I had said a word,' he said to himself in his heart.

Whether Mr. Welby, whose eye was keen enough, whatever his sympathy might be, read his young

friend's thoughts at once it would be impossible to tell. If he did he showed no feeling for them. He went on calmly to the end of his new acquisitions, pointing out their beauties; and then when Laurie was sick and faint, and felt that he hated Titian, put them all together in a most leisurely way and locked them up in a drawer of a beautiful ebony cabinet all inlaid with silver. Then he returned to his visitor and drew a chair to a table and pointed to one near him. 'Come and tell me all about it,' he said with the most sudden change in his tone.

'Ah, you have heard!' cried Laurie, half indignant, half mollified.

'I have heard nothing,' said the painter; 'but I see you have brought a heap of troubles to cast down at your neighbour's door. Come, let us have them out.' Whereupon poor Laurie told his story, brightening as he told it. Curiously enough, when he brought himself face to face with his misfortunes, the burden of them always was lightened for him,—a case so much unlike what it is with ordinary men. When he stood at a distance from them, so to speak, they swelled into great mystic, devouring giants; but they were only manageable human difficulties, and no more, when he faced them near. 'I must take to work in earnest,' said Laurie, 'that's all, so far as I am concerned. It is worse for Ben; but fortunately, as I have a profession——'

'Have you a profession?' Mr. Welby broke in

abruptly, looking Laurie, without a shadow of a smile, in the face, as if moved by genuine curiosity; and the young man gave a little nervous smile.

'You thought I was amateur all over,' he said, 'and I daresay I deserved it. But don't tear me to pieces altogether; that stage of existence is past.'

'I asked for simple information,' said the R.A. 'If you have a profession now is the time to stick to it. I thought you were only a virtuoso; but if you have really been brought up to anything——'

'You make me feel very small,' said poor Laurie, blushing like a girl up to his hair. 'I have not been brought up to it, I know. I have been a virtuoso merely, but I am not too old to begin to work in earnest. And there is nothing I love like art.'

'Art!' said Mr. Welby, with great strain and commotion of his eyebrows. He gave his shoulders a little shrug, and he talked volumes with those shaggy brows. Laurie felt himself scolded, pushed aside as a puny pretender.

'I did not mean to say anything so very presumptuous,' he said with momentary youthful petulance, in answer to this silent lecture; and then added, with equally sudden youthful compunction, 'I beg your pardon. I do want your advice.'

'Art!' repeated the R.A. with a little snort. 'You had much better take to a crossing at once. I went at it, sir, when I was twelve years old. I never had a thought in my noddle but pictures. I've gone

here and there and everywhere to study my trade; and after fifty years of it, sir,' cried the Academician, springing suddenly to his feet, seizing a canvas which stood against the wall and thrusting it upon one of the vacant easels up to Laurie,—'look at that!'

It was the beginning of a sketch half smeared over. One exquisite pair of eyes, looking out as from a mist of vague colour, seemed to look reproachfully upon their creator; but there certainly was an arm and leg also visible, of which Laurie felt like poor Andrea in Mr. Browning's wonderful poem, that if he had a piece of chalk——. Welby, R.A. was growing old. He knew it perfectly, and perhaps in his soul was not sorry; but when he saw the signs of it on his canvas it went to his heart.

'Look at that!' he said, with a sort of savage triumph; 'drawing any lad in the Academy would be ashamed of!—after fifty years as hard work as ever man had. I might have been Lord Chancellor in those fifty years. I might have sat on the woolsack or been Governor of India; and here I stand, a British painter, not able to draw the tibia! By Jove, sir, a man would need to be trained to bear mortification before he could stand that!'

'I should think you might laugh at it if any man could,' said Laurie, feeling half disposed to laugh himself; but he had too true an eye to attempt to contradict his master.

'I can't laugh at failure,' said Mr. Welby, snatching the sketch he had just exhibited off the easel and thrusting it back into its place against the wall. 'I had some people here to-day who would have given me a heap of money for that piece of idiocy. What do they care? It would have been a Welby, no matter what else it was. Welby in his drivelling stage, the critics would have called it, and just as good for a specimen of the master as any other. And that is what a man comes to, my dear fellow, after fifty years—of art!'

'Yes,' said Laurie, with the confidence which he had as a young man of the world, and not as an art student; 'I don't say anything about the tibia, for you know best; but to put a soul into a smeared bit of canvas is what no Lord Chancellor in the world could do; and you know quite well it would have made any young fellow's fortune to have painted that pair of eyes.'

'Eyes! Stuff!' said the R.A., but he took back the canvas again and looked at it with a softened expression. 'The short and long of it is, my dear boy,' he said, 'that Art is a hard mistress even to those who serve her all their lives; and you have done no more than flirt with her yet. Is there anything else open to you? You were quite right to come to me for advice. Nobody knows better the shipwrecks that have been made by art. Why, you cannot come into this house, sir, without feeling what an uncertain

syren she is. There was poor Severn, as good a fellow as ever breathed. I don't say he could ever have been Lord Chancellor; but he might have made a very respectable attorney, perhaps, or merchant, or shoemaker, or something; and here 'he's gone and died, the fool, at forty, leaving all those children, and not a penny, all along of art.'

'But what do you say of the padrona?' said Laurie, kindling into a little subdued enthusiasm. 'What else could she have done? What would have become of the children?'

'They would have gone to the workhouse, sir, and there would have been an end,' said the Academician, sternly. 'The padrona, as you call her—and, by Jove! had I been Severn, I'd have shut her up sooner than let a parcel of young fellows talk of her like that. Well, then, Mrs. Severn—as we'll call her, if you please—the young woman has a pretty talent, and her husband taught her after a fashion how to use it. And her pictures sell—at present. But how long do you think it will be before everybody is stocked with those pretty groups of children? They're very pretty, I don't deny; and sometimes there's just a touch that shows, if she had time, if she had not to work for daily bread, if she wasn't a woman, and could be properly educated, why that she might do something with it which——. But everything is against her, poor soul! and she's not wise enough to make hay while the sun shines;

and when the sun has done shining, I wish you would tell me what the poor thing is to do?'

'I hope the sun will shine as long as she needs it,' said Laurie, warmly.

'Ah! hope, I dare say; so do I. But that's as much as wishing she may die early, like him,' said Mr. Welby, rubbing his eyelid. 'It can't last, my dear fellow; and that's why I say the workhouse at once, and have done with it. But anyhow, Mrs. Severn is no example for you. She was made for work, that woman. As long as she has her baby to carry about at nights, and her boys to make a row, and that child Alice, with her curls—why the woman is a tiger for work, I tell you. But you are made of different matter. And besides,' said the R.A., with the faintest twist of a smile about his lip, 'a woman may content herself with the homely sort of work she can do; but a young fellow aims at high art—or he's a muff if he don't.' The old man concluded with a little half-affectionate fierceness, softening towards Laurie, who was everybody's favourite, and who was thus affronted, stimulated, and solaced in a breath.

'Perhaps I am a muff,' said Laurie, laughing. 'I am inclined to think so, sometimes. I am not sure that I want to go in for high art. I want to master my profession as a profession, as I might go and eat in the Temple. I am not too old for that,' he said, wistfully, giving his adviser one of those half-

feminine, appealing glances which never come amiss from young eyes.

Once more the R.A. became pantomimically eloquent. He shrugged his shoulders, he shook his head, he delivered whole volumes of remonstrance from his eyebrows. Then, after a few minutes of this mute animadversion, suddenly put his head between his hands, and stared right into Laurie's eyes across the table. 'Let us hear what chances you have otherwise,' he said. 'I beg your pardon for insinuating such a thing, but hasn't your family some sort of connexion with—trade?'

'Oh, yes,' said Laurie. 'You need not beg my pardon. It is too big a connexion to be ashamed of —Renton, Westbury, and Co., at Calcutta, and there's a house in Liverpool, I believe. Ben ought to have been sent out, had we stuck to the traditions of the family. It has been in existence for a hundred and fifty years.'

'Well, then, suppose you go out in place of Ben,' said Mr. Welby, musingly, as he might have asked him to take physic; upon which Laurie laughed, and grew rather red.

'My cousin, Dick Westbury, went in Ben's place,' he said;—'the very sort of fellow to make a merchant of. You might as well tell me to go and stand on my head.'

'If I could make all the money by it that those fellows do, I should not mind standing on my

head,' said Laurie's counsellor, reprovingly. 'Why shouldn't you be "the very sort" as well? I don't see that any particular talent is required. A good head, sir, and close attention, and a knowledge of the multiplication-table. But perhaps they did not teach you that at Eton?' Mr. Welby added, with a gentle sneer, such as he loved.

'If they did, I have forgotten it years ago,' said Laurie. 'Indeed it would not do. You know it would not do. A fellow has to be brought up to it; and besides, I shouldn't go if I were asked,' he added, with a sudden cloud on his face.

'That settles the question,' said his adviser. 'You are a fool, my dear fellow; but I thought as much. Well, then, there are all the Government offices;—couldn't your friends get you into one of them? The very thing for you, sir. Not too much to do, and plenty of time to do it in. You could keep up your studio still.'

'But you forget the competitive examination,' cried Laurie, just as his brother Ben had replied to a similar suggestion. 'I don't know Julius Cæsar from Adam,' he said, laughing. 'I have not an idea which Göthe it was that discovered printing. I can't tell whereabouts are the Indian Isles. They'd pluck me as fast as look at me. You forget that we're high-minded, and that influence is no good now.'

'Confound it!' said Mr. Welby, with energy,

pausing to find something else more feasible. Then he bent confidentially across the table, coaxing, almost appealing, to his intractable neophyte. 'My dear fellow, what do you say to literature?' said the R.A. in his softest tone. Upon which Laurie burst into uncontrollable laughter.

'I see no occasion for laughter,' the Academician continued, half offended. 'Why shouldn't you write as well as another? I assure you, sir, I know half-a-dozen men who write, and they have not an ounce of brains among them. All you require is the knack of it. They tell me they make heaps of money; and it does not matter what lies you tell, or how much idiocy you give vent to,—especially about art,' he said, with sudden fierceness. 'And, to be sure, in this beautiful age of ours everybody reads. I don't see why you should not go in for the newspapers or the magazines, or something. There is no study wanted for that; there's the beauty of it. The more nonsense you talk the more people like it. And so far as I can see, it's as easy to talk nonsense on paper as in company; easier, indeed, for there's nobody to contradict you. All you want is the knack. I know the editor of the "Sword," my dear fellow. I'll get you an engagement on that.'

'But I never wrote two sentences in my life,' said Laurie; 'and, as for literature, it cannot be less uncertain than art.'

'Quite a different thing, my dear fellow,' said the

R.A., eagerly; 'not one in fifty, let us say, knows a picture when he sees it. I might say one in a hundred. Whereas everybody, I suppose, understands the rubbish in the papers; everyone reads it, at least, which comes to the same thing. I know men who are making their thousands a-year. It is only getting the knack of it.'

Laurie gave a faint laugh; but the fun had by this palled upon him. For a moment he covered his face with his hands. It was part of his temperament to have these moments of impatience and disgust with everything. Then Mr. Welby got up and began to walk about the room in some excitement. 'Confound the fellow, he will do nothing one tells him!' he said. But after a while the old painter came back to his seat, and was very kind. He entered into the question, more gravely, even with a certain melancholy. He pointed out to him, again, how many wrecks there were on all the coasts, of men who had mistaken their profession, and gave him an impressive sketch of all the toils he ought to go through ere he could worthily bear the name of painter. 'And, after all, find yourself like me, baffled by the tibia!' he cried, with a kind of passion. But in this talk Laurie recovered his spirits. His friend, in his compunction, gave him practical advice which would have been of the highest importance to any beginner. 'I warn you against it all the same,' he said, working his eyebrows like the old-fashioned telegraph. But

Laurie took the information and the advice without the warning, and went away, once more seeing in a vision that picture on the line in the Academy with Laurence Renton's name to it, and a crowd of his fine friends wondering around.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PADRONA.

When Laurie left Mr. Welby's studio he had not, however, satisfied himself either with No. 375, Fitzroy Square, or with the advice on art subjects which he had come to seek. Old Forrester replied to his inquiry if Mrs. Severn was at home with a benevolent smile:—'It ain't often as she's anywhere else, sir,' said that authority. 'I never see such a lady to work,—and a-singing at it, as if it was pleasure. Them's the sort, Mr. Renton, for my money,' the old man added with enthusiasm. 'Master, he's ready to swear at it sometimes, which ain't consistent with art.'

'Don't you think so?' said Laurie. 'But when art becomes a passion, you know——'

'I don't hold with passion,' said Forrester. 'It stands to reason, Mr. Renton, that a thing as is to hang for ages and ages on a wall, didn't ought to have no violence about it. I hate to see them poor things a-hurting of themselves for centuries. You look at 'em, sir,' he added, pointing to an old picture, in

which the action was somewhat violent, which hung in the hall; 'they couldn't do that nohow, not if they were paid millions for it. Me and Shaw was talking it over the last time he was here. I don't hold with that sort of passion, not in a picture. And I don't always hold with master himself, Mr. Renton, between you and me. He's been swearing hawful, sir, over that poor tibbie there. And what business has any man, sir, to have his tibbie in such a hattitude? It's hoisted right round, nigh out of its socket. I wouldn't do it, not for no money, if it was me.'

'But you have no such fault to find with Mrs. Severn,' said Laurie, who, in the impatience of youthful criticism, had made a similar observation to himself.

'Bless you, sir, there's never nothing out of harmony in them groups,' said Forrester; 'and easy, too, to tell why. Not as I'm a-making light of her heye; she's got a fine heye for a lady, sir,—in composition;—but, seeing it's her own little things as is the models, would she put 'em in hattitudes to hurt 'em, Mr. Renton? You may take your oath as a lady wouldn't. Master, he pays his models, and he don't care. Will you walk up, or will I go and say you're here?'

'I think I may go without being announced,' said Laurie, who was a little proud of the *petites entrées*, though it was only to a humble house. As he went up the great, dingy staircase he put his

fingers lightly through his hair, and looked with some dismay at the limp pinkness of the rose in his button-hole. It was hanging its head, as roses will when they feel the approach of frost in the air. There is a curious dinginess, which is not displeasing, in those old-fashioned houses. The walls were painted in a faint grey-green; the big stairs had a narrow Turkey carpet, very much worn, upon them, and went winding up the whole height of the house to a pale skylight in the roof. A certain size, and subdued sense, of airiness, and quiet, and space was in the house, though London raged all around, like a great battle. The arrangement of the first floor was much like that of Mr. Welby's apartments. There was a great shadowy, dingy drawing-room, with three vast windows, always filled with a kind of pale twilight,—for it was the shady side of the Square,—and opening from that, by folding-doors, a second room, which did duty as Mrs. Severn's dining-room; and behind that, again, the studio. The door of the dining-room was open, and Laurie paused, and went half in as he passed. The children were there with their daily governess, who was, poor soul! almost at the end of her labours. She was struggling hard to keep their attention to the last half of the last hour when the intruder's head thrust in at the door made further control impossible. There were two small boys, under ten, and one little creature with golden locks, seated at the feet of the eldest of the family, who was working at the window.

'Alice, with her curls,' was almost too big for Miss Hadley's teaching. She was seated in that demure, soft dignity of the child-woman, with all the importance of an elder sister, working at little Edith's frock; a girl who rarely said anything, but thought the more; not beautiful, for her features were not regular, but with lovely, thoughtful brown eyes, and a complexion so sweet in its varying colour that it felt like a quality of the heart, and one loved her for it. Her curls were what most people of the outside world knew her by. In these days of *crêpe* locks and elaborate hair-dressing, Alice's soft, silken, perfect curls, nestling about her pretty neck, softly shed behind her ears, were distinction enough for any girl. They were chestnut, —that chestnut, with the gold in it, which comes next to everybody's favourite colour in everybody's estimation;—and there was a silken gloss upon them which was old-fashioned, but very sweet to see, once in a way. She sat,—in the perfectly unobtrusive dress of modern girlhood; simple frock up to the throat, little white frill, tiny gold locket, without even a ribbon on her hair,—against the afternoon light in the window, just raising her eyes with a smile in them to Laurie, and lifting up one slender finger by way of warning. 'Mamma is in the studio,' said Alice, under her breath. He thought he had never seen a prettier picture than that little interior he had peeped into. Miss Hadley was not bad-looking, Laurie decided. She had keen black eyes under those deep brows,

and not a bad little figure. And little Frank, with such a despairing languor over his soft, round, baby face; and Edith, all crumpled up like a dropped rose by Alice's feet; and the light slanting in through the big window, trying and failing to penetrate the dimness of the grey-green walls, all covered with pictures. Everything was in the shade, even little Edith, all overshadowed by her sister's dress and figure;—an afternoon picture, with every tone subdued, and a touch of that weariness upon all things which comes with the waning light;—a weariness which would vanish as soon as it was dark enough to have lights, and when the hour came for the family tea.

When Laurie knocked at the studio door, he could hear, even before he was told to come in, the painter singing softly over her work, as Forrester had said. She was no musician, which, we suppose, may be understood from the fact of this singing at her work. Her voice was not good enough to be saved up for the pleasure of others, and accordingly was left free to hum a little accompaniment to her own not unmelodious life. Mrs. Severn was not a partisan of work for women, carrying out her theory, but a widow, with little children, working with the tools that came handiest to her for daily bread; and she had been accordingly adopted respectfully into a kind of comradeship by all the artists about, who had known her husband, and were ready to stand by her

as much as men of the same profession might. Nobody ever dreamt of thinking she was going out of her proper place, or taking illegitimate work upon her, when she took up poor Severn's palette. There are ways of doing a thing which people do not always consider when they are actuated by strong theoretical principles. The padrona took to her work quite quietly, as if she had been born to it; did not think it any hardship; worked her regular hours like any man, and asked little advice from any one. In short, if she had a fault, it was generally believed that it was her indifference to advice. She rarely asked it, and still more rarely took it. Since the time when poor Severn died, and when she passionately explained to her friends that it was less pain to manage her own affairs than to talk them over with others, she had gone on doing everything for herself. Whether that was a wise way of proceeding it would be hard to tell; but at least it was her way. Poor Severn had not been a great painter, poor fellow; he had done very well up to a certain point, but there he had stopped; and then he had travelled about a great deal with his family, and studied all the great pictures in the world, and made sketches of a great many novel customs and practices, with the view of making a new start,—'as Phillip did.' John Phillip, as every one knows, being an ordinary painter, went to Spain, and came home a great one; but poor Severn found no inspiration awaiting him

at any wayside. One of the children had been born in Florence, and one in Dresden; they were almost the only evidences that remained of those piteous wanderings and labours.

But wherever the poor fellow went, a pair of bright, observant eyes were always by his side, taking note of things which he only tried to make use of, and by degrees his wife had got possession of the pencil as it dropped out of his failing hands. Of course, her drawing would not bear examination as his would have done. He did the best he could to give her a more masculine touch, but failed. She was feeble in her anatomy, very irregular in respect to everything that was classical; but, somehow, bits of life stole upon the forlorn canvases in Fitzroy Square under her hand. 'You may trust her for the sentiment,' he said, poor fellow! almost with his last breath, 'and her eye for colour; but, Welby, I'd like to see her drawing a little firmer before I leave her.' This he was never fated to see; and Mrs. Severn's drawing was not likely to get firmer when her teacher was gone. It was never very firm, we are bound to admit; and we are also obliged to confess, against our will, that the padrona catered a great deal for the British public in the way of pretty babies, and tender little nursery scenes. Her pictures were domestic, in the fullest sense of the word. In her best there would be the little child saying its prayers at its mother's knee, which never fails to touch the Cockney soul;

and in her worse there would be baby at table breaking his mug and thrusting his spoon everywhere but where he ought. They were very pretty, and sometimes, as if by chance, they stumbled into higher ground, and caught a look, a gleam of heaven; an unconscious essay, as it were, at the English Mary and her Blessed Child, which has never yet been produced by an insular painter—only an essay—and it never had time or hope to come to more. But the British public, bless it! liked the pictures, and bought them—not for their gleams of loftier meaning, but for the exquisite painting of baby's mug, and because the carpet under the mother's feet was so real that you could count the threads. The painter did not ask herself particularly why her pictures became popular; she was very thankful, very glad, and took the money as a personal favour for some time, feeling that it was too good a joke. But all the freshness of the beginning was over long before the day on which Laurie knocked at the studio door. She painted now with a more swift and practised hand, but still very unequally; sometimes mere mugs and carpets, with little human dolls; and sometimes women with children, more and more like the divine ideal; and out of her sorrow had grown softly happy again without knowing how—happy in her work, and her freedom, and her independence, and her children. Alas! yes; in her independence and freedom. She liked that, though many a reader will think the worse of her for liking

it. But it is not as a perfect creature she is here introduced, but as a woman with faults like others. Everybody knew that she had been very fond of poor Severn, and had stood by him faithful and tender till his last breath; and that she was very desolate when he was gone, and cried out even against God and His providence a little in her anguish and solitude—but pondered and was silent, and pondered and was cheerful—and, at last, things being as they were, got to be glad that she was free and could work for herself. And she was comparatively young, and had plenty to do, and there were her children. A woman cannot go on being heart-broken with such props as these. And it pleased her, we avow, since she could not help it, to have her own way.

It was her husband who had called her padrona caressingly to everybody when they came back from Italy—the 'missis,' as he would explain—and what had been a joke at first had become the tenderest of titles now. Those only who had been Severn's friends dared continue to address her by that name, and Laurie was one of them, young though he was. When she said 'Come in,' he opened the door softly. She was standing by her easel, hastily finishing something with the little light that remained. 'Don't disturb me, please, for five minutes,' she said, without looking round, 'whoever you are. I must not lose this last little bit of light.'

'Don't hurry,' said Laurie, sitting down behind

her in a Louis Quinze fauteuil, which had figured in many pictures.

'Ah, it is you!' said the padrona; but she did not turn round for the moment, or take any further notice of him. This third studio was not like any of the others. It was much barer, and, indeed, poorer. There was in it none of the classic wealth of casts and friezes which adorned Laurie's sanctuary. There were no pictures in it, as in Mr. Welby's stately studio. Had the padrona possessed ebony cabinets inlaid with silver, or a rare Angelichino, no doubt she would have sold them for some mean-spirited consideration of Alice's music-lessons, or a month at the seaside for the bundle of children whose pleasure was more to her, alas! though she was a painter, than all the pictures in the world. There were some prints only on the walls, grey-green here as elsewhere throughout the house—prints of Raphael's Madonnas —she of San Sisto within reach of the painter's eye as she worked, and she of Fogligno, in her maturer splendour, on the mantel-piece; but there was a great dearth of the usual 'materials' with which an artist's studio abounds. The padrona's work was of a kind which did not require much consultation of examples; her draperies were chiefly modern, her subject the ever-varying child-life which she had under her eye. A little lay-figure, which little Edith called her wooden sister, was in a corner, dressed—alas! for art —in one of Edith's frocks, considerably torn and

ragged, which was about the highest touch of effect Mrs. Severn permitted herself. There was something curious altogether in the commonplace, untechnical air of the room. It is the defect of women in general when they adopt a profession to be rather too technical; but the padrona took her own way. She had given in so far, however, to the use and wont of the craft as to wear a grey garment over her gown, which fitted very nicely, and looked as well as if it had been the gown itself. She was a middle-sized woman, fully developed, and not girlish in any way, though her face had the youthfulness of a gay temperament and elastic disposition. Her eyes were hazel, with a great deal of light in them; her mouth full of laughter and merriment, except when she was thinking, and then it might perhaps be a trifle too firm; her hair brown, and soft, and abundant. Laurie sat in the fauteuil and watched her taking the good of the last remnant of the light with a curious mixture of kindness and admiration, and a kind of envy. 'If I could but go at it like that!' he said to himself, knowing that had he been in her place he would so gladly have thrown down his brush on the pleasant excuse of a visitor. There was a certain professional ease in the way he seated himself to wait her leisure, such as perhaps could have been bred in none other but this atmosphere, softly touched with the odour of pigments, and with the lay figure in the corner. Literature has less of this brotherhood of mutual

comprehension—at least, in England—being a morose art which demands to a certain extent seclusion and silence; but art is friendly, gregarious, talkative. The padrona began to talk to him immediately, though she did not turn her head.

'I am so glad to see you,' she said; 'at least I shall be glad to see you whenever I have finished this arm. It has worried me all day, and if I don't do it at once it will slip out of my mind again. I wish one could paint without drawing; it is hard upon an uneducated person; and I am sure if it was not for those horrid critics, the British public does not care if one's arm is out of drawing or not.'

'Welby does not think so,' said Laurie. 'Have you seen his tibia that he is raving about?'

'Ah, but then that wounds his own eye,' said Mrs. Severn, half turning round; 'just as a false note in music wounds my child, though it does not disturb me much. The dreadful thing is not to know when you're out of drawing or out of tune. One feels something is wrong, but one is not clever enough to see what it is.'

'I don't think you are often out of tune, padrona nostra, or out of drawing either,' said poor Laurie, with a sigh.

'Dear, dear!' said Mrs. Severn, 'what does this mean I wonder — that our friend is out of tune himself?'

'Dreadfully out of tune,' said Laurie, 'all ajar

and not knowing what to do with myself, and come to you to set me right.'

Then there was a pause of a minute or two, and the painter turned from her easel and put down her palette with a sigh of relief. 'That's over for to-day at least,' she said, and came and held out her hand to her visitor. 'I saw it in the papers,' she said, 'but I would not say anything till I could give you my hand and look you in the face. Was it sudden? We have all to bear it one way or other; but it's very hard all the same, and especially the first blow.'

It was the first time since the reading of the will that anybody had sympathised honestly with one of Mr. Renton's sons for their father's death; and, near as that event was, the voice of natural pity startled Laurie back to natural feeling. The twilight, too, which hid the tears that rushed to his eyes, and the soft, kind clasp of the hand which had come into his, and the voice full of all sympathies, united to move him. A sudden ache for his loss, for the father who had been so good to him, struck, with all its first freshness, into the mind where dwelt so many harder thoughts. When Mrs. Severn sat down, and bade him tell her about it, the young man went back to the sudden death-bed, and was softened, touched, and mollified in spite of himself; his voice trembled when he told her those wanderings of the dying man,—as everybody thought them,—and of his affectionate confidence that 'Laurie would not mind.'

'I see there is something more coming,' said the padrona, with that insight in which he had trusted; 'but whatever it is I am sure he was right, and Laurie will not be the one to mind.'

'I don't mind,' said Laurie, with a sob that did no discredit to his manhood; and if there had been a shadow of resentment in his heart for the injury done him, in these words it passed away; and instead of asking the padrona's advice as he had intended, as he had asked old Welby's, he told her, on the contrary, about his father, and his anxieties touching Ben, and all the sinkings of heart, of which he did not himself seem to have been conscious till sympathy called them forth. I do not know whether the softness of the domestic quiet, and the padrona's face shining upon him across the table, with all the light in the room concentrated in her hazel eyes, and the soft monosyllables of sympathy—the 'poor Laurie'—that dropped from her lips now and then,—one cannot tell what effect these might have had in making the character of this interview so different from that he had held with Mr. Welby. Had it been her daughter to whom he was talking there could of course have been no doubt about it. But anyhow this was how it happened. Laurie made it apparent to her and to himself that it was the tender anguish of bereavement which had brought him here to be comforted, and was perfectly real and true in thus representing himself; and Mrs. Severn was

very sorry for him, and thought more highly of him than ever. It had grown almost dark before she rose from her chair and brought the conversation to an end.

'You are too young to dwell always on one subject,' she said. 'Come in now and have tea with the children. They are all very fond of you, and it will do you good. Of course you have not dined: you can go and dine later at eight or nine: it does not matter to you young men. And, if the talk is too much, Alice will play to you.'

'The talk will not be too much,' said Laurie; but as he followed the padrona out of the room he plucked the rose out of his button-hole and crushed it up in his hand and let it drop on the floor. A rose in a man's coat is perhaps not quite consistent with the deepest phase of recent grief. But he was no deceiver in spite of this little bit of involuntary humbug. Other thoughts had driven his grief away, and diminished its force perhaps; but those were true and natural tears he had been shedding, and he felt ashamed of himself for having been able to think of the rose, and did not want the padrona's quick eye to light upon that gentlest inconsistency; but on the whole it did not appear to him that he was unequal to their talk. So he went and played with the children while Mrs. Severn withdrew to change her dress for the evening, seating himself in the inner room where the lamp was burning and the table

arrayed for tea, while Alice in the dim grey drawing-room, with the folding-doors open, played softest Lieder, such as her soul loved, in the dusk; and Miss Hadley sat and knitted, casting now and then a keen look from under her deep brows at Laurie in his mourning; and the urn bubbled and steamed, and little Edith climbed up into her high seat by the table, waiting till the padrona in her lace collar should come down to tea.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TEA-TABLE.

Mrs. Severn's society was of a peculiar kind,—it had something of the ease of French society, with the homeliness of the true Briton. Very rarely, indeed, did she make calls. She never gave parties of any description whatever; and yet there was always a little flow and current of human minds and faces about her. The class which in London is perhaps more at liberty to please itself than any other class,—at least in England,—was that to which she belonged, both in right of her husband and of herself, and which circulated about her, very independent of rule, and very full of life. I do not know if I should call it the artist-class, for that is a wide world, and has many divisions, and fine people abound in that as in every other division of society. The padrona's friends were painters, authors, journalists, people with crotchets, public reformers, persons of every kind to whom intellect, as they called it, clearness and brightness, and talk, and the absence of ceremony, were sweeter than any other

conditions of society. They came to her studio, some of them, with only a knock at the door,—but these were intimates,—and chatted while she went on with her work. They dropped in in the evening, and chatted again sometimes till midnight; they filled the rooms with discussion of everything in earth and heaven,—art news, political news, society news, a little of everything; they held hot discussions on social questions with the zeal of people immediately concerned, not with the languor of good society. The padrona 'received' almost every evening in this way after her work was done; and it was people whose work was done also who came to see her,—with fresh air in their faces, and all the eagerness and commotion of fresh life in their minds. I do not mean to say that the intelligence of these visitors was of the highest class, or that anything like the tone of a French salon,—the salon which has now become almost as much a tradition as Mrs. Montague's drawing-room with its feather hangings,—pervaded the grey-green drawing-room in Fitzroy Square; but only that the people there came together to talk, and kept up an unfailing stream of comments, not merely on the people of their acquaintance, but on everything that was going on. It was easier work for a stranger to get on with them than it was in society where conversation is so personal, and the doings of that small class which calls itself the world, are so uppermost in everybody's thoughts. Nobody

asked, 'Did you hear what Lady Drum said to Lady Fife last night at the Clarionett's ball?' or went into raptures over the dear Duchess, or discussed the causes which led to that unfortunate separation between Sir Edward and his wife. To be sure, you might get just as tired, perhaps more so, listening to discussions about the 'sweet feeling' of this or that picture, or its bad drawing, or the uncertainty of its meaning, or about whether this exhibition was better than the last, or what Horton had said about it in the 'Sword,' or about spiritualism,—of which there were many distinguished professors in the padrona's circle, or about social science, or women's work, or the Archæological Society; but still it was a different sort of thing from the common languor and the common wit.

When Laurie had played with the children, and taken his cup of tea, and the lamp was carried into the large drawing-room, he did not care to leave the easy-chair in which he had placed himself and undertake that long walk to Kensington Gore. A certain sensation of ease had stolen over him. He had thrown down his pack of troubles at his neighbour's door, as old Welby had said, and, with a certain soft exhaustion, stretched himself at full length in the low chair, with his feet at the other end of the hearth-rug. There was no fire, and it was dark at that end of the room; and the lamp had been placed on a table near the opposite wall, where the ladies sat working.

The padrona herself was making something up with lace and ribbons, and Miss Hadley, not yet gone home, but with her bonnet on ready to start, had returned to her knitting. Alice had gone up withthe children to see them put to bed. It would be difficult to tell why Laurie lingered at the other end of the room in comparative darkness. Perhaps because he meant still to ask closer counsel from the padrona,—perhaps because his artist eye was pleased with the effect of that spark of light, with her head fully revealed in it. They let him alone, that being the fashion of the house. 'He is tired and sad, poor boy!' Mrs. Severn said to her friend; and they went on with their talk, and left him to come to himself when he pleased. Laurie was in no hurry to come to himself. He lay back lazily resting from thought, and let the picture, as it were, steal into him and take possession of him. The room was so large that it was quite dim everywhere but round that one table, and the furniture looked a little ghostly in the obscurity, the chairs placing themselves, as chairs have such a way of doing, in every sort of weird combination, as though unseen beings sat and chattered around the vacant tables. And in the distance the white, bright light of the lamp came out with double force. There was, perhaps, a touch of carelessness in the padrona's coiffure, or else it was that she could not help it, her hair being less manageable than those silken, lovely curls of her child's; but she was

different in black silk gown and her lace collar from what she was in her blouse. Laurie sat dreamily with his eyes turned towards the light, and listened to the hum of the voices, and sometimes caught a word or two of what they said. No doubt some one would come in presently to break up this quiet, but in the meantime there was a charm in the stillness, in the dimness, in the presence of the women, and motion of their hands as they worked; such soft sounds, scarcely to be called sounds at all, and yet they gave Laurie a certain languid pleasure as he sat exhausted in his easy chair.

'Work does not suit everybody,' he heard Mrs. Severn say. 'We think so just as we think people who are always ill must be enjoying bad health;—because we are fond of work, and never have headaches. It is unjust.'

'I thought we were born to labour in the sweat of our brow!' said Miss Hadley, who was a little strong-minded, and had her doubts about Genesis.

'Not born,' said the padrona, with a soft laugh; 'only after Eden, you know; and there are some people who have never come out of Eden; for instance, my child.'

'Ah, Alice!' Miss Hadley answered, with a little wave of her head, as if Alice was understood to be exceptional, and exempted from ordinary rule.

'Fancy the child having to work as I do!' said Mrs. Severn. 'Fancy her being trained to my pro-

fession, as some people tell me I should do. I think it would be nothing less than profane.'

'My dear, you know I think all girls should know how to work at something,' said the governess, 'when they have no fortunes; and you will never save money. You couldn't, if your pictures were to sell twice as well; and though you are young and strong, still——'

'I might die,' said the padrona. 'I often think of it. It is a frightful thought when one looks at these little things; but I have made up my mind for a long time that it is best never to think. One can't live more than a day at a time, were one to try ever so much; and there is always God at hand to take care of the rest.'

'But generally, so far as I know,' said Miss Hadley, 'God gives the harvest only when the farmer has sown the seed.'

'Which means I am to bring up my child to do something,' said Mrs. Severn. 'And so she does,—a hundred things,—now, doesn't she?—and makes the whole house go to music. I can't train Alice to a trade. If necessity comes upon her, some work or other will drop into her hands. I was never trained to it myself,' the padrona added, with a half-conscious smile about the corners of her mouth, and perhaps just a touch of innocent complacency in her own success, 'and yet I get on,—as well as most.'

'Better than most, my dear; better than most,'

the governess said, with a little enthusiasm. 'But you know how much you have been worried about your drawing, and how sensitive you are to what those wretched men say in the "Sword." Do you think I don't notice? You take it quite sweetly when they talk about the colour, or texture, or the rest of their jargon; but you flush up the moment they mention your drawing. Now, if you had been trained to it, don't you see, as a girl——'

The padrona grew very red as her friend spoke. It was clear that the criticism touched even when thus put, and Laurie, in the background, felt an overwhelming inclination to wring the neck of the strong-minded woman. But then she laughed very softly, with a certain sound of emotion that might have brought tears just as well.

'When I was a girl,' she said, 'how every one would have stared to think I should ever be a painter, making my living!—how they would have laughed! "What, our Mary!" they would all have said. It came so natural to do one's worsted work, and read one's books, and go to one's parties! And I suppose, as you say, I should have been working from the round, and studying anatomy,—faugh!—my child to do that! I would rather work my fingers to the bone!'

'I think you are wrong, my dear,' the governess said; and Laurie hated her, listening to the talk.

As for the padrona, she shook something like a

tear from her eyelash. Laurie thought it was pretty to see her hands moving among the lace and the ribbon, with that look of power in them, knowing exactly how to twist it, how to make the lace droop as it ought. Not a very monstrous piece of work, to be sure. 'Hush!' she said, 'here are some people coming up-stairs. Most likely Bessie Howard, who will tell us what the spirits are doing; or the Suffolks from over the way, who are great friends of hers. They have just come home from Dresden, and I want to hear what they have been about there.'

'I hate travel-talk,' said Miss Hadley, 'and I detest the spirits, so I'll go; and though it is not the first time, nor the second, we have spoken on this subject, I do hope, my dear, you'll think of what I've said.'

The padrona shook her head; but the two women kissed each other with true friendliness just as the other visitors came into the dim room. Laurie had risen reluctantly from his seat in the darkness to bid the governess, who was one of the family, good-night. 'I am sorry to hear of your trouble, Mr. Renton,' she said, as she gave him her hand. She was not bad-looking, though she was strong-minded; and though he had wanted to wring her neck a moment before, the brightness of her eyes,—though she was half as old again as Laurie,—and the kindness of her tone mollified the woman-loving young man in spite of himself.

'Thanks,' he said; 'you must have thought me a brute; but I don't feel up to talk,—yet.'

'It is not to be expected,' said Miss Hadley; 'but it is a blessing to be young and have all your forces unimpaired. You must do as much as you can, and not think any more than you can help. Good-night!'

'Good-night!' Laurie said, opening the door for her; and then he stood about in the room helplessly, as men stand when they object to join the other visitors; and finally went back to his chair by the vacant fire. 'He is waiting for the child,' Miss Hadley said to herself as she went down-stairs; and the thought was in her mind all the way home to her little rooms in one of the streets adjoining Fitzroy Square, where she lived with her old sister, who was an invalid. They had a parlour and two bed-rooms, and bought their own 'things,' and were attended and otherwise 'done for' by their landlady; and, on the whole, were very comfortable, though all the noises of the little street, and echoes from the bigger streets at hand, went on under their windows, and the geraniums in their little balcony were coated with 'blacks,' and the dinginess of the surroundings, out and in, were unspeakable. People live so in the environs of Fitzroy Square, and are very lively, pleasant sort of people; and think very well of themselves all the same.

Laurie was not waiting for the child; he was

waiting to catch the padrona's eye and say good-night to her; but that inconsistent woman was now all brightness and eager attention to the travel-talk which Miss Hadley hated. The people who had just come from Dresden were a young painter and his wife, and there were so many things and places and people to be talked of between them. 'You saw old Hermann,' the padrona said, with a smile and a tear. 'Ah, he used to be so kind to,—us;—and the big Baron with all his orders, and Madame Kurznacht? Did they ever speak of us?—and hasn't old Hermann a lovely old head? Did you paint him? Ah! it is so strange,—it is like a dream to think of the old times!'

Could any man, though jealous, and sulky, and neglected, interrupt this to say a gruff good-night? Not Laurie, at least. He thought to himself that letting alone sometimes went too far, and that he, too, might have had a word addressed to him now and then; but still it went to his heart to hear her recollections and the tone in her voice. She was thinking, not of these new people and their travels, but of poor Severn, and the days when he and she had wandered over the world together. She was better off now. Laurie believed that there was no doubt she was better off, and less harassed with care and bowed down with anxiety; but yet,—poor Severn! And two painter-folk straying about the world, free to go anywhere, the man emancipating

the woman by his society,—is not that better than one alone? And how could her friend, with a heart in him, stop her in her tender thoughts by thrusting himself into the midst of them? While Laurie, sulky but Christian, was thus cogitating, Alice came into the room, and came softly up to him. 'Are you here all by yourself, Mr. Renton?' she said.

'Yes, Alice, all alone. Sit down and talk to me,' said Laurie.

'I wish I could go and play to you,' said Alice; 'but that would disturb the people. It is so strange to see you sad.'

'I am not so very sad,' Laurie said, 'not to trouble my friends with it, Alice; and I am only waiting now to say good-night. I am going to work so hard I shall have no time to be sad.'

'At that pretty window with the flowers in it,' said Alice, 'away at Kensington? It must be nice to be so near the Park.'

'I don't care much for the Park now,' said Laurie. 'I must go without disturbing the padrona. You will tell her I said good night.'

'Mamma is coming,' said Alice; 'she always hears what people say if they were miles off; and I want to ask about dear old Dresden and old Hermann, too.'

Then the padrona came up to him still with her lace in one hand, and sat down by him in the shade. 'Did you think I had forgotten you were there?' she

said. 'I know you want to go now, and I have come to tell you what you are to do,—that is, what I think you should do;—you don't mind my interfering, and giving my advice?'

'I want it,' said Laurie. 'I have been waiting all this time to see what you would have to say to me before I went away.'

The padrona smiled and nodded her head. 'You must not stay at Kensington Gore,' she said. 'It is too dear and too fine if you are going to work. You must come to this district, and content yourself with two rooms. There are plenty of lodgings to be had with the window made on purpose, and a good light. I will look out for you, if you please; and then you must go in for it,—the life-school, and all that sort of thing. It is odious,' said the woman-painter, with a little impatient movement of her head, 'but you men must go through everything. And you can come here, you know, as much as you like; and I am sure Mr. Welby will give you what help he can; and you will do very well,' said Mrs. Severn, smiling at him. 'When I can get on with no training at all, what should not you do? And we shall all be proud of you,' she added, patting his arm softly with her disengaged hand. She was his comrade, and still she was a woman, which made it different; and he went away with a little reflection of the kind glow in the padrona's eyes warming his heart. No doubt that was the thing to do. He saw her seat herself at the

table again where by this time other people had made their appearance, and begin to smile and talk to everybody without a moment's interval: but she lifted her eyes as he went out at the door with a little sign of amity. How pleasant it is to have friends! Love is sweet, but upon love he had turned his back, poor fellow! giving up all the vague delight of its hopes. Alice, with her curls, had no power to move him. That ground was occupied. But friendship, too, was sweet. And to have a friend who understood him at the first word—who saw what he meant almost before it was spoken; who could give him bright, rapid, decisive advice, the very sound of which had encouragement in it,—not hesitating, prudential, disheartening, like old Welby's;—a friend besides who had bright, lambent-glowing eyes, which consoled what they looked at, and a soft voice——. In this, at least, Laurie was in luck. He met two or three people that night at the club, which was not of such lofty pretensions as White's or Boodle's, and called itself the Hiboux or the Hydrographic, I am not sure which,—a place where men were to be met with all the year through, and which was not deserted even in September. Laurie belonged to a grander club as well, but his dilettante tastes had made him proud of the Hiboux. And his friends collected round him to hear the news, and were very sympathetic, and approved of his intention to face his difficulties. 'It may be the making of you, my dear fellow, as it was the making of Frank

Pratt,' said the man who wrote those papers in the 'Sword' which threw half the artists in England into convulsions. 'Thanks,' said Laurie; 'you think you will have one more innocent to massacre.' And he looked so fierce at the representative of literature that the audience was moved to a shout of laughter. It was not himself Laurie was thinking of, but the padrona, whose drawing this ruffian had reviled. He had disturbed a woman whose shoes he was not worthy to brush, Laurie said to himself, and avoided the reptile, with a bitterness worthy of his misdeeds. He could not eat his partridge in comfort under that fellow's eye; who was not a brute by any means, and had a certain kindness for a young man in misfortune, even though he did write for the 'Sword.'

When Laurie got home to Kensington Gore the first thing he saw was the drawing on the mantelpiece of the Three Princes, or the Three Paths. He took it down and examined it, not without a certain complacency. No doubt it was a clever drawing. Then he took his pencil with a sudden suggestion in his mind. Somehow since he drew it his own figure seemed to him scarcely dignified enough for the subject:—it was too comic, with all those traps festooned about it. He took his pencil, as I have said, and put lightly in, half-way between himself and the National Gallery, a shadow of a figure with one arm stretched out towards him. Not a sylph like that fairy form which he had pictured on the rocks Ben

was climbing. This was a full, mature, matron figure, Friendship, steadfast and sweet, not beckoning the hero on to the delights of life, but holding out a helping hand. A hand may be very strong and helpful and sustaining, though it is soft and fair and delicate. This thought passed through Laurie's mind as he indicated by a line or two the gracious, open, extended palm. Alas! no sylph,—not her of the little letters who might have been all the world to Laurie,—but Friendship, the only feminine presence that could ever enter his existence. He sighed as he put in this new personage in the drama, yet hung over it all the same, feeling that even this lent an interest to his own path. Not glory and a coronet which Frank, no doubt, as a soldier had his chance of winning; not wealth and honour which more naturally and certainly would come to Ben;—but the National Gallery finally, and Friendship on the way to give him a hand. Such were to be the special characteristics of Laurie's way through the world.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHARLOTTE STREET, FITZROY SQUARE.

Laurie's removal was not accomplished with the passionate haste which distinguished that of his brother Ben. There was no particular hurry about it. The padrona, with the natural impatience of a woman, found a lodging almost immediately, which he saw and approved; but Laurie took his time, and consoled poor Mrs. Brown at Kensington Gore, and found her a lodger in the shape of a 'real hartis-gentleman,' as she herself perspicuously expressed it, having felt in her soul from the beginning that Laurie was something of a sham. Her new tenant was a young painter who had made a successful *debût* at the last Academy, and was for the moment a man whom the picture-dealers delighted to honour. He was ready to take Laurie's pretty fittings, his contrivances, everything he had done for himself; but Laurie's good sense deserted him on that point. The money would have been convenient no doubt; but he could not part with the rubbish of his own collecting and contriving, which represented to him

not so much money, but so many moments of amusement and pleasant thoughts. There was not room for half of them in Charlotte Street, where he was going; so he carried his shelves, and stands, and quaint little cupboards, to No. 375, Fitzroy Square, and put them up in every corner he could find, the children hanging on him as he did so in an admiring crowd. So that he got a great deal more good of his belongings than Ben did of the marqueterie and buhl; and his successor furnished the rooms at Kensington Gore with conveniences of a much more expensive kind, and was altogether more splendid, and lavish, and prodigal than Laurie, whose tastes were very unobtrusive. His new lodging in Charlotte Street was on the first floor; the front room,—called the drawing-room,—had three windows in it, one of which was cut up into the wall a few feet higher than the others, giving that direct sky-light which is necessary to a painter; and there was a sleeping-room behind. This was all Laurie's domain now-a-days, and the rooms were not large. There was a table in the corner near the fireplace, as much out of the way as possible of the great easel and the professional part of the room, where he ate his breakfast, and anything else he might find it necessary to regale himself with at home, in a meek kind of humble way,—under protest, as it were, that he could not help himself. His new landlady's ideas on the subject of cooking were of the most limited

character. She gave him weak tea and bacon for breakfast without any apparent consciousness of the fact that such luxuries pall upon the taste by constant repetition, and that a diet of *toujours perdrix* wearies the meekest soul. Laurie thought it most expedient, on the whole, not to inquire into her sentiments in respect to dinner, but swallowed his morning rasher with a grimace, and was, on the whole, 'a comfortable sort of gentleman,' the woman reported;—'not like some as thinks they can't give too much trouble.' But he missed the mistress of Kensington Gore. He missed the neat maid, and his boy, who exasperated him in the studio, and kept all his friends in amusement; and it was a different thing looking out from the dreary windows in Charlotte Street upon the dreary houses opposite,—upon the milkman and the potboy wending their rounds, and the public-house at the corner, and the awful blank of gentility in the windows on the other side, to what it used to be when he could glance forth upon the sunny Park from among his flowers, with, even at this time of the year, the old ladies taking their airing, and the nurserymaids under the leafless trees. Nurserymaids and old ladies are not entrancing objects of contemplation except to their respective life-guards and medical men; but still it was better than in Charlotte Street. Miss Hadley lived opposite to him, and was by no means of his opinion; and when she was at home watched with a little amusement for such

glimpses of her neighbour as were to be had. In the morning,—when there was not a fog,—Laurie, to start with, barricaded his windows, leaving only the upper part of the middle one unshuttered, and then set himself to work before his easel with Spartan heroism. Old Miss Hadley, who knew all his story, had her chair near her window, entering into the little drama with zest, and kept her eye upon him. For the first day or two he would remain in this sheltered condition until the afternoon light began to fail, when all at once he would sally forth with an alacrity and air of relief which much amused the watcher. But by-and-by this power of activity began to wane. 'My dear, he's getting a little tired,' the old lady said, with a chuckle, to her sister, a week after Laurie's arrival. 'I heard the bolts go about one o'clock, and the window opened; and there he was in his velvet coat, with his palette and all the rest of it. I am sure Mr. Welby never looked so professional; and he has a nice brown beard coming, and I like the looks of the lad,' said Miss Hadley, who was a soft-hearted old soul.

'He is not such a lad,' said Miss Jane, 'and his beard has been come this twelvemonth at least; but I never thought it would last very long. I hate amateurs.' For all that, however, she would look up and nod at Laurie, when she came home early and the young man appeared at his window. As the days went on old Miss Hadley found her life quite bright-

ened up by the new neighbour, whose proceedings she watched with so good-humoured an interest.

'He had Shaw the Guardsman to sit to him to-day,' was her next report; 'and dreadfully bored the poor boy did look to be sure. I saw the warrior go away, and then our friend stepped out on his balcony and yawned as if his head would have come off.' Next time the report was of a different character. 'The boy is getting used to us,' the old lady said; 'he has been buying some plants for his window. He stood a long time to-day and watched the Jenkinses getting into their dog-cart. He took off his hat, my dear, when he was going out, when he saw me come to the window. He knows I am your sister, I suppose.'

'I do not admire his taste watching the Jenkinses,' said Miss Jane, with a momentary frown of jealousy. She would have been very indignant had any one called her a match-maker, and yet almost without knowing it there had come into her head a little plan about Laurie and 'the child.'

'Bless you, he was only amusing himself,' said the elder sister. 'I have no doubt it looked very funny to him,—and the fuss and the cloaks, and the bottles sticking out of the basket. They were going to see their married sister at Battersea, my dear. Her husband is a coal-merchant, and I believe they are very well to do. But I am very glad, I must say, that Mr. Renton went opposite to live, and not

at the Jenkinses. So many girls in a house when people let lodgings is not nice; a young man may be inveigled before he knows; and Mrs. Robinson is a very respectable sort of a person; I am very glad he has gone there.'

'I daresay he thinks it miserable enough,' said the governess. These little talks occurred every evening; and though Miss Hadley did not confide all the vicissitudes of Laurie's life to Mrs. Severn, yet the main incidents became generally known 'in the Square.' They knew that Shaw had been sitting to him, and that he had been bored, and the incident afforded no small amusement to a circle of admiring friends.

'It must be Miss Hadley who has betrayed me,' said Laurie; 'the fellow has such heaps of talk. I declare I know everything about his family, from the first of his name down to his sister's little Polly. Little Polly it was. And if a man may not be permitted to yawn after two hours of that ——'

'A man might be permitted to yawn in the midst of it,' said the padrona, 'which I am sure you didn't. But it was droll to rush out into your balcony, and relieve yourself as soon as he was gone.'

'There is no air in that little hole of a place,' said Laurie; and then he bethought himself that the other people about him were all of them inmates of similar holes. 'I mean it's very nice, you know,' he added, 'and close to everything,—schools, and

British Museum, and everything a man can desire. But I am very fond of as much air as I can get.'

'I always thought this was a very airy neighbourhood,' said little Mrs. Suffolk, who lived in another of the streets near Fitzroy Square, 'and so handy for the children, in five minutes they can be in the Park.'

'One gets never to listen to those fellows,' said her husband; 'if you take an interest in them they go and make money of you. Their wives are always ill, and their children dying, and that sort of thing. Glossop's got your old rooms over at Kensington, do you know, Renton? And come out no end of a swell. I don't know why, I am sure, unless that he has a friend on the "Sword."'

'Not so bad as that,' said Laurie. 'Those were two very pretty pictures of his this year.'

'Oh, ah, pretty enough,' said the other; 'if that is all you want in a picture. British taste! But I'd like to know what sort of people they must be who like to hang these eternal simperings on their walls. I believe there are heaps of men who don't care twopence for art. But to choose bad art where good is to be had, out of mere perverseness!—I don't believe in that. They pin their faith on the "Sword," and the "Sword" lies and cheats right and left, and looks after its own friends; and the British public pays the piper. When one thinks of Glossop, that

one has known all over the world, in Laurie Renton's pretty rooms at Kensington Gore!'

'And Laurie here!' said the padrona, 'which is great luck for us. But, my friend, you are mistaken. There are heaps of people, as you say, who prefer bad art to good. It is of no use pretending to deny it;—and,' Mrs. Severn added with a little sigh, 'we all trade upon it, I fear, if the truth were told.'

'No, indeed, I am sure not that,' said the painter's wife. 'There stands one who never does, I say to him a hundred times, "Reginald dear, do think of a popular subject; do paint something for common sort of folks!"—but he never will. They say it is only the *nouveaux riches* that buy now-a-days,' Mrs. Suffolk continued in injured tones, 'or dealers; and we know nobody who writes on the "Sword." You do, of course, Mr. Renton,—you have been so much in the world.'

'I met Slasher the other day at the club,' said Laurie, with a laugh which he could only half restrain. 'He is not such a bad fellow. If you will let Suffolk bring you to my little place some time, I will show him to you. He does not bite in private life.'

'Oh, I don't know that I should like to meet such a man,' the little woman said, with an anxious glance at her husband; and then she took Laurie a step aside, and became confidential. 'If you would but make Reginald and him friends, Mr. Renton! I don't mind speaking to you. Nobody knows what talent

Reginald has; and I am so afraid he will get soured with never finding an opening; and he can't afford to keep up a club like you young men, and we have been so much out of the world. What does it matter studying nature and studying the great masters, and staying out of London till everybody forgets you?' the poor young woman continued, with tears in her eyes. She was young, and it was hard upon her to keep from crying when she met Laurie's sympathetic look. 'It is not so much the money I am thinking of,' she said; 'but if Reginald were to get soured——'

'I'll get Slasher to meet him directly,' said Laurie, with eager promptitude; 'and you may be sure everything I can do——'

'Oh, thanks!' said the painter's wife. 'It is not that he wants any favour, Mr. Renton, but only an opening; and we have been so much out of the world.'

'I wonder you don't get up a Trades-Union, and make a stand,' said Mrs. Thurston, who was literary. 'How anything can keep alive that is so badly written as the "Sword," I don't know. It is because you are all so eager to see what it says about you, even though you hate it. Just like the articles in all the papers about women! If women were not so curious to see "what's next," do you think any one would take the trouble to write all that? Don't mind it, and you take away its power.'

'Ah, it is so easy for you,' cried Mrs. Suffolk;—

'you have nothing to do but to go to your publisher; but what with the Hanging Committee putting all their friends on the line, and those wicked papers that never think of merit, but only of some one the writers know——'

'That's enough, Helen,' said her husband, with an attempt at a smile; 'you talk as if we minded. But what is the criticism of an ignorant fellow, who does not know a picture when he sees it, to me,—or any one?' he added, with the slightest half-perceptible quiver of his lip. 'Constable has just come back from Italy, Renton;—one of our old set;' and so the talk ran on.

This little party was assembled as before in the great drawing-room. There was a fire now which made it brighter and took away something of its quaintness, and the padrona and her guests had drawn near it, carrying the light and the circle of faces into the centre of the room. Now and then somebody would sing, or play,—but talk was what they all loved best, and music as an interruption of the latter was not greatly cultivated. The padrona herself was always working at something with her swift, dextrous fingers; and the ladies who formed her court had generally brought her work in their pockets, to add to their comfort while they talked. Laurie spent the next half-hour standing with Suffolk before the fire, talking of Italy, where they had met, and of the old set, with all that curious mingling of

laughter and sadness which accompanies such recollections. Of 'the old set' so many had already dropped by the way, as the passengers dropped through the trapdoors in Mirza's Vision, while yet the fun of their jokes and their adventures lasted vividly in their comrades' minds. 'You remember poor old So-and-so,' the young men said to each other, looking down with their brown faces on the the soft glow of the fire; 'what fun he was! what scrapes he was always getting into! There was not a painter in Rome who did not turn out the day of his funeral!—and poor Untell, with his bad Italian. What nights those were in the Condotti! There never was a better fellow. Did you hear what an end his was?' This was how the talk went on,—without any moral in it as of the vanity of human joys; nothing but pure fact, the laughter and the tragedy interlaced and woven together; while the ladies round the lamp with the light on their faces, talked too, but not with such historical calm, of the injustices of the 'Sword,' and of the Academy, and of the public; of the advantages of other professions,—literature, for example,—at which its representative shook her head; of the children's education and their health, and, perhaps, a little of the ills of housekeeping,—subject sacred to feminine discussion. Women do not meet, I suppose, nor do women die, as men do. They had no such melancholy, jovial records behind them to go over,—their talk was of the present and the future,—a

curious distinction,—and the padrona's society numbered always more women than men.

Next day, perhaps, it would be at Suffolk's house that Laurie spent his evening, which was a house not unlike the one in which he himself lived,—a thin, tall strip of building in which two rooms were piled upward upon two rooms to the fourth storey. The two parlours on the ground-floor were domestic, and there Mrs. Suffolk sat, very glad to see her husband's friends when they came in, but not so entirely one of the party as when the padrona was the hostess. Her little room, though it was as prettily furnished as humble means would allow, was not calculated for the reception of a crowd, and after they had paid her their *devoirs*, the men streamed up-stairs to the corresponding but larger room above, which was the studio,—a place in which there were no hangings to be poisoned with their tobacco, nor much furniture to impede their movements. Perhaps the wife of one would come with him and take off her bonnet and stay with Mrs. Suffolk, bringing her work with her, and resuming those endless, unfailing talks about the children, and the housekeeping, and the injustice of the world. For it must be understood that the artist-life I am attempting to describe is not that of the highly-placed, successful painter, against whom the Academy has no power,—who is perhaps himself on the Hanging Committee, and has the 'Sword' at his feet in abject adoration;—but of the younger

brotherhood, in a chronic state of resistance to the powers that be, and profoundly conscious of all the opposing forces that beset their path. Little Mrs. Suffolk had care on her brow, as she sat with her sister in art and war, in the little drawing-room down-stairs, discussing the inexpediency of those wanderings to and fro over the earth, which probably both had gone through and enjoyed, but which ofttimes made the public and the picture-dealers oblivious of a young painter's name. Up-stairs, however, there would probably be five or six young fellows, of a Bohemian race, bearded, and bronzed, and full of talk, who had not yet taken the responsibilities of life on their shoulders, and laughed at the wolf when he approached their door. Two or three of them would collect round Suffolk's picture, which he had been working at all day, to give him the benefit of their counsel, in the midst of the wreath of smoke which filled the room. Most of them were picturesque young fellows enough,—thanks to the relaxed laws of costume and hair-dressing prevalent among them. And to see Suffolk with the lamp, raising it in one hand to show his work, shading it with the other that the light might fall just where it ought to fall, tenderly gazing at the canvas on which hung so many hopes, with the eager heads round him studying it judicially, would have made such a picture as Rembrandt loved to paint.

'I don't quite like that perspective,' said one.

'Look here, Suffolk, your light is coming round a corner,—the sun is there, isn't he?—or ought to be at that time of the day.'

'What time of the day do you call it?' said a second.

'Why, afternoon, to be sure,' cried the first critic; 'don't you see the shadows fall to the left hand, and the look in that woman's eyes? It's afternoon, or I'm an ass! Did you ever see a woman look like that except in the afternoon?—sleepiest time, I tell you, of the whole day.'

'She's weary of watching, don't you see?' said his neighbour. 'Matter-of-fact soul! But I'd get that light straight if I were you, Suffolk. He's wrong about the sentiment, but he's right about the light.'

'Give us the chalk here,' said Constable, who had just come back from Italy; 'there's just a touch wanted about the arm, if you don't mind.'

'The colour's good, my dear fellow,' said Spyer, who was older than any of them, and a kind of authority in his way, 'and the sentiment is good. I like that wistful look in her eye. She's turned off her lover, but she can't help that gaze after him. Poor thing!—just like women. And I like that saffron robe; but I think you might mend the drawing. I don't quite see how she's got her shoulder. It's not out of joint, is it? You had better send for the surgeon before it goes down to Trafalgar Square.'

All these blasts of criticism poor Suffolk received, *tant bien que mal*, doing his best to seem unmoved. He even suffered the chalk which 'that beggar, Constable—a tree-painter, by Jove!—a landscape man,' he said afterwards, with the fervour of indignation, permitted himself to mark the dimpled elbow of his Saxon maiden. The mists of smoke and the laughter that came out of the room from cheery companions who were lost in these mists, and the system of give and take, which made him prescient of the moment when Spyer and Constable too would be at his mercy, as he was now at theirs, made their comments quite bearable, when one word from the 'Sword' would have driven the painter frantic. And to do them justice, it was only the pictures which were in the course of painting on which they were critical. Groups now and then would collect before that picture of the English captive boys in the Forum, which the Academy had hung at the roof, and which had come home accordingly unapplauded and unsold, though later;—but I need not anticipate the course of events. Suffolk's visitors gathered before it, and looked at it with their heads on one side, and pointed out its special qualities to each other, not with the finger, as do the ignorant, but with that peculiar caressing movement of the hand which is common to the craft. 'What colour! by Jove, that's a bit of Italian air brought bodily into our fogs;—and the cross light is perfect, sir!' Spyer

said, who had just been so hard on his friend's drawing. If they found out faults which the uninstructed eye was slow to see, they discovered beauties too; and then gathered round the fire, and fell into twos and threes, and went back to that same talk of the past and the 'old set,' in which Laurie had indulged on the previous night. The 'old set' varied according to the speakers; with some it was only the fellows at Clipstone Street; but with all the moral was the same; the cheery days and nights, the wild sallies of youthful freedom, the great hopes dwindled into nothing, the many, many fallen by the way, not one-half of the crowd seeming to have come safely through the struggles of the beginning. 'Poor So-and-so! If ever there was a man who had a real feeling for art, it was he; and as good a fellow'—they added, puffing forth meditative clouds; and there would be a laugh the next moment over some remembered pranks. Laurie had formed one of many such parties ere now. He, too, had been of the 'old set:' he had his stories to contribute, his momentary sigh to breathe forth along with the fumes of his cigar. But, perhaps, he had never in his amateur days felt so completely belonging to the society in which he found himself. Sometimes, perhaps, he had laughed a little, and given himself a little shake of half-conscious superiority when he left them, and set out to Kensington Gore as to another world; but Charlotte Street was emphatically the

same world, and the *esprit de corps* was strong in Laurie's heart. 'Anch' io pittore,' he said to himself as he stood indignant before Suffolk's beautiful picture which had been hung up at the roof. It was a beautiful picture; and one of these days the Hanging Committee might treat himself in the same way; and if by chance criticism should really be so effectual as everybody said, why should not something be done for Suffolk—using the devil's tools, as it were, to do a good action—by means of Slasher and the 'Sword?'

The majority of the young men went away after an hour's talk and smoke unlimited; but Laurie was one of those who remained and went down to supper, along with Spyer and Constable, to the back room down-stairs, which was the little dining-room. Mrs. Suffolk was very careful to keep the folding-doors shut, and to make two rooms, though it certainly would have been larger and might have been more comfortable had they been thrown into one. It was Mrs. Spyer who was her companion that evening, who was older than she, and commented a little sharply on this poor little bit of pretension, as Laurie walked part of the way home with the pair. 'I like nice dining and drawing-rooms as well as any one,' Mrs. Spyer said, 'but if I were Helen, I would be comfortable, and never mind.' 'All the same she is a good little woman,' her husband had said, irrelevantly;—for, to be sure, nobody doubted that

she was a good little woman. They had cold beef and celery and cheese on the table, and refreshed themselves with copious draughts of beer. I do not say it was a very refined conclusion to the evening, but I think Laurie was better amused and more interested than after many a fine party. He walked home with Spyer, talking of Suffolk's picture, and the injustice that had been done him, *jettant feu et flamme*, as they mentioned the Academy, yet hoping that band of tyrants could not be so foolish two years running. 'The thing is, to have him written up in the papers,' Spyer said; 'a fellow of his talent cannot be long kept in the background; but if the papers were to take him up, it would shorten his probation.' 'I hate the papers,' said Mrs. Spyer. 'Why don't we have private patrons, as we used to have, and never mind the public? To think of a wretched newspaper deciding a man's fate! I would not give in to it for a day.'

'But we must give in to it, or else be left behind in the race,' said her husband. And Laurie thought more and more, as he listened to all this talk, of the influence he himself might exercise at the club and elsewhere upon Slasher and the 'Sword.'

CHAPTER XX.

LAURIE'S WORK.

The first grand question to be decided, when Laurie settled in Charlotte Street, was what his first picture was to be. It is true that Mr. Welby, and even the padrona, who was so much more hopeful, were all for mere study and life-schools, and the lectures at the Academy, and anatomical demonstrations, and other disagreeable things, which Laurie, always amiable, gave in to, to please them, not doubting of the advantage of the studies in question. But still his anatomy, and his notes, and studies from the life, however careful, were only means to an end; and there was no reason why the end itself should not be pursued at the same time,—or at least so he thought. He had painted pictures before now as a mere amateur, and in that capacity had even,—once,—obtained a nook in the Academy's exhibition; and why he should now suspend his chief work, and, having become a professional painter, paint no longer, was what Laurie could not perceive. He was not the man to exhibit his study of the Norman

fisherwoman or Italian peasant who might chance to be posing at the school, as some of the Clipstone Street fellows did. His work there, of course, would help him in his real work at home; but to spend his entire time in preparation for work, and do nothing, seemed to Laurie plain idiocy. 'I painted nothing for three years on end when I was like you,' old Welby said. 'You require to be a painter, sir, before you can paint a picture; and it is hard enough work to make yourself a painter. If I were in your place I'd never look at a canvas bigger than that for at least a year.'

'That' was the study of a head which Laurie had taken down with him to Mr. Welby's studio. It was one of the padrona's, and the old painter had praised the sketch. As for Laurie, he turned it hastily with its face to the easel, and laughed the uneasy laugh of embarrassment and offence.

'I rather flattered myself I was a painter,' he said, and then paused and recovered his temper. 'The fact is, I must keep myself up,' he exclaimed; 'I must feel as if I were doing something. So long as I paint merely scraps I feel myself demoralised. And then you forget I am not a novice,' Laurie said, with some pride. He had been all over Italy, and had studied in Rome, and was very learned in many artistic matters. To be told that he had first to make himself a painter was rather hard.

'Of course you are a novice,' said the R.A., 'and

quite natural too. I don't want to be disagreeable, my dear fellow, but an amateur is really worse,—you may take my word for it,—than an absolute beginner. The very traditions of amateur art are different. If you were making a fair start I should know exactly what to tell you; but how can I tell how much you may have to unlearn?'

This, it will be allowed, was not encouraging. Laurie went up-stairs afterwards three steps at a time, with his blood boiling in his veins. He gave the padrona an animated little address about old fogies in general, and R.A.'s in particular, to her extreme amazement, as she stood at her work. It was a crisp, sunny, wintry morning, and Mrs. Severn was very busy. She opened her brown eyes and laughed, as Laurie, breathless, came to an end.

'They will be giving advice,' she said, 'I know; and advice, unless when it is just what one wants, is a terrible nuisance. I see exactly what you mean.'

'I have no objection to advice,' said Laurie, half angry, half laughing, 'when it is kept within due limits; but there is such a thing as going too far.' And then he told her the extent of Mr. Welby's sin, not without a momentary thought gleaming through his mind as he spoke, that it was the fresh, new life which the old painter objected to see coming within the exclusive boundaries of the profession. 'Art is like any other trade,' he said, as he concluded his tale; 'the workmen are bent on pursuing their mystery,

and would like to stone away any interloper who inclines to come in.'

Mrs. Severn said nothing for a minute or two, but went on working at her easel with her back to him; and when one is eager and excited to start with, there is nothing more exasperating than to have one's warm and one-sided statement received thus with chilling silence. It is the surest way to fill up what is wanting of the cup of indignation. 'You say nothing,' Laurie continued, with impatience, 'and yet, of course, you must have suffered from it yourself.'

'You will think I am helping to bar the door of my trade,' said the padrona, 'and I know I deserve that you should fly through the window or through the ceiling in wrath; but I can't help it. He was quite right. You have all your amateur habits to break yourself of, and to get to work like,—like,—one of us. Don't be vexed. I have wanted to say it before, and, of course, with the generosity of my kind, I say it now when you are down.'

'You too!' Laurie said with a pang. He took two or three turns up and down the painting-room before he could speak. And but for pride, which would not permit him to show how deep was his mortification, I fear he would have blazed and exploded out of the house; but as soon as he had come to himself, pride, more potent than any better feeling, cleared the cloud from his brow.

'I thought you had a better opinion of me,' he said, reproachfully, standing behind the easel and casting pathetic glances at her. 'I came to you to be,—consoled, I suppose,—like an ass. I thought I was already something of a painter,—at least to you,—or why should I be encouraged to attempt anything? Why didn't you say to me, "Go and be a shoemaker?"—as, indeed, Welby was honest enough to do.'

'Now, Laurie, don't be unjust,' said the padrona. 'Don't you see it is because I expect you to do something worth while that I want you to study hard and learn everything? What is a year's work to you at your age? When one gets old one would give everything for the chance of such a preparation. What am I but an amateur myself, not half instructed as I ought to be? And that is why I am so anxious that it should be different with you,—at your age.'

'I cannot see what my age has to do with it,' said Laurie, 'nor why you should always want to set me down as a boy;' and then he paused and compunction overtook him. He went up to his adviser, in the coaxing way which Laurie had been master of all his life. He could not take her hand, for she had her brush in it and was working all the time; but he took the wide sleeve of her painting-dress between his fingers and caressed it, which came to much the same thing. 'You are so good to me,' he said,—'always

so kind and so good. I never thought you would be against me too.'

Thus it will be seen that to be advised, and even ill-used and trodden upon by a friend who is a woman, and not uncomely to look at, is on the whole less disagreeable than to be snubbed by an ancient R.A.

The padrona laughed, but her eye melted into loving-kindness as well as laughter. 'You are a boy,' she said, 'and a very insinuating one into the bargain. But I am not going to be coaxed out of my opinion. You ought to go home this very minute and lock up all your canvases and take to chalk and paper and pencils for a whole year; and then you can come back to me and I will tell you what I think you should do.'

'If I am not to come back for a whole year I may as well go and hang myself at once,' said Laurie; and so the talk fell into lighter channels. The truth was that he spent a great deal more time than he had any call to do in the padrona's studio, and hindered, or did his best to hinder, her work; and perhaps liked better to examine her sketches and criticise them, and make suggestions thereupon, than to labour steadily, as he ought to have been doing, at sketches of his own. But this had not yet lasted long enough to attract anybody's attention,—even hers or his own; for, of course, after such a shock as his life had sustained, this was still an unsettled mo-

ment. He had not shaken himself down yet, nor found his standing-ground after the convulsion; and it was natural he should seek the counsel of his friends.

But the result was, after these conversations,—the one more discouraging than the other,—that Laurie went direct to his colourman's and chose himself a lovely milk-white canvas six feet by ten, and had it sent home immediately, and went on his knees before it in silent adoration. His imagination set to work upon it immediately, though he was self-denying enough not to touch it for days; but undeniably that very night there were various sketches made of a heroic character before he went to bed. It was difficult to choose a subject,—much more difficult than he supposed. Several great historical events which struck his fancy had to be rejected as demanding an amount of labour which in the meantime was impracticable. He wandered in a range of contending fancies all night long in his sleep, with Suffolk's Saxon maiden in the doorway of her father's grange, dismissing the Norman squire who had become her lover, floating through his brain in conjunction with various Shakspearian scenes, and some of the padrona's baby groups, with the padrona herself in the midst; and when he woke the dream continued. Sometimes he thought he would abandon history and paint a Mary with that face,—not a girl Mary in the simplicity of youth, but one with

thoughts matured, and the wider, greater heart of experience and ripe womanhood. Foolish boy! For, to be sure, he was a boy after all.

It took Laurie a long time to decide this matter in a satisfactory way. One day his inclinations were scriptural, and another historical; and on the third he would have made up his mind to a modern *genre* picture, but for the size of his canvas, which was clearly intended for something heroic. He settled at last,—which indeed was almost a matter of course,—upon a very hackneyed and trite subject, being somehow driven to it as he felt by the influence of Suffolk's pictures, which he admired with all a young man's indignant warmth. The subject which he chose was Edith seeking the body of Harold. 'In the lost battle, borne down by the flying.' Nothing could well have been more inconsistent with his state of mind, or tastes, or general inclinations. He was not given to melancholy thoughts, neither,—though Laurie was sufficiently fanciful,—had any analogy struck him between his own first beginning of the fight and that end, always so linked with the beginning, of utter loss and overthrow and darkness. It was not any chance gleam of a forecasting, profound imagination, or passionate sense of the fatal chances of the battle, that suggested it to him. Such an idea might have occurred to Suffolk, but it was inconsistent with the very constitution of Laurie's mind. He chose his subject in pure caprice, pro-

bably because it was the most unlike of anything he could imagine, to his own tender, friendly, unimpassioned nature. There are moments of youthful ease and hope in which tragedy comes most natural to the cheerful, unforeboding soul; I cannot tell why,—perhaps, as Wordsworth says, out of the very 'prodigal excess' of its personal content. Laurie was so absorbed in his subject,—in sketching it out, and putting it on the canvas, and bringing his figures into harmonious composition,—that his Clipstone Street studies suffered immensely, and he even failed in the usual frequency of his visits to 'the Square.' Had he gone there as usual, he would, of course, have betrayed himself, and he was determined that not a word should be said until he could,—with a certain triumph,—the triumph of individual conviction and profound consciousness of what was best for himself over all advice,—invite his counsellors to come and look at what was about to be. So long as this fit of fervour lasted Miss Hadley had nothing to report, except the barricading of his windows from morning till afternoon, as long as the light lasted,—unless, indeed, on foggy days, when the painter would glance out at the sky from his balcony, palette in hand, a dozen times a day, with despair in his face. The padrona thought she had gone too far, and affronted him, and was sorry, and sent him friendly messages, recalling the truant; but Laurie, notwithstanding the yearning of his heart, was true to his grand object.

As he stood before the big canvas, putting in those vast, vague outlines of the future picture, it seemed to him that he already saw it 'on the line' in the Academy, with the little scene he had already imagined going on below. But by this time he had half forgotten the fine people whose astonishment he had once amused himself by imagining. Kensington Gore had been swept away by the current, and looked like some haunt of his boyhood. What he thought now was chiefly, 'They will have changed their opinion by that time.' 'They,' no doubt, included old Welby, who had been so hard on the young painter; but I fear that the special spite of this anticipation was directed against the padrona. What did it matter after all, except, indeed, in the strictest professional point of view, what old Welby thought?

Edith had not got beyond the first chalk outline, when Forrester, Mr. Welby's man, came one morning to Charlotte Street, with a message from his master. Forrester was understood to know nearly as much about art as his master did, and resembled him, as old servants often do,—and I rather think Laurie was secretly glad, now matters had progressed so far, of this means of conveying, in an indirect way, the first news of his rebellion to 'the Square.' At all events he sent for him to come up-stairs, awaiting his appearance with a little trepidation. Forrester, however, was not arrogant, as some critics are. He came in with the most bland and patronising looks, ready,

it was evident, to be indulgent to everything. When he had delivered his message, he cast an amiable glance around him. The room was lighted only by the upper light of the middle window, all the rest being carefully closed, and even that amount of daylight was obscured by the shadow of the great canvas which was placed on the easel, where all the rays that were to be had out of a November sky might be concentrated upon it. Forrester was too thoroughly acquainted with the profession of which he was a retainer not to understand at once the meaning of this big shadow, and Laurie in his anxiety thought or imagined that the critic's lips formed themselves into an involuntary whistle of astonishment, though no sound was audible. But the old servitor of art felt the claims of politeness. Instead of displaying at once his curiosity about the work in hand, he paid his tribute of applause with a grace which his master could scarcely have emulated. 'That's a nice sketch, sir,' Forrester said, indicating one of the Clipstone Street studies. 'I hope you ain't working too hard now, we see you so little in the Square. I like that effect, Mr. Renton; master would be pleased with that effect.'

'I am very glad you think so, Forrester,' said artful Laurie, leading his visitor on.

'Master's a little severe, Mr. Renton,' said Forrester, 'but you young gentlemen take him a deal too much at his word. Bless you, he don't mean half he

says. I know he'd be pleased. I call that a very nice drawin', Mr. Renton; better nor many a dealer buys for a picture. I always said, sir, as you was one as would come on.'

'I am much obliged to you for your good opinion, Forrester,' said Laurie; 'it is very kind of you to take so much interest in me.'

'I've been among painters all my days,' said Forrester. 'I sat to Opie, sir, though you wouldn't think it, when I was a lad. I don't know as there is a man living as understands 'em better nor I do. I knows their ways; and if I don't know a picture when I sees one, who should, Mr. Renton? I've been about 'em since I was a lad o' fifteen, and awful fond o' them, like as they was living creatures,—and a man ain't worth much if he don't form no opinion of his own in five-and-forty years. Me and master goes on the same principle. It's the first sketch as he's always mad about. "Take the big picture and hang it in your big galleries," he says, "and give me the sketch with the first fire into it, and the invention." I've heard him a saying of that scores of times; and them's my sentiments to a tee. But master, he's all for the hantique, and me, I go in for the modern school. There's more natur' in it, to my way of thinking. You've got something on your easel, sir, as looks important,' Forrester continued, edging his way with curious looks towards the central object in the room.

'I don't know if I should let you see it,' said Laurie; 'I have only just begun to put it on the canvas; and you are an alarming critic, Forrester,—as awful as Mr. Welby himself.'

'No, sir; no, no,' said Forrester, affably; 'don't you be frightened; I know how to make allowances for a beginner. We must all make a beginning, bless you, one time or other. Master 'ud grieve if he see a big canvas like that. He'd say, "It's just like them boys;" but I ain't one to set a young gentleman down. Encourage the young, and tell your mind to the hold, that's my motto, sir,' the old man said, as he placed himself in front of the easel. As for poor Laurie, the fact is that he grew cold with fright and expectation as he watched the face of the critic. Forrester gave vent to a prolonged Ah! accompanied by a slight expressive shrug when he took his first look of the canvas, and for several moments he made no further observation. To Laurie, standing behind him in suspense, the white chalk shadows seemed to twist and distort themselves, and put all their limbs out of joint, in pure perversity, under this first awful critical gaze.

'If I might make so bold, sir,' said Forrester, mildly, 'what is the subject of the picture, Mr. Renton?' which was not an encouraging remark.

'Of course I ought to have told you,' cried Laurie, very red and hot. 'It is an incident after the

Battle of Hastings,—Edith looking for the body of Harold. Edith, you know, was——'

'I've seen a many Hediths,' said Forrester. 'I ought to know. I'm an old stupid, sir, not to have seen what it was; but being as it's in the chalk, and me not having the time to study it as I could wish——. I don't doubt, Mr. Renton, as it's a fine subject. It did ought to be, seeing the many times as it's been took.'

'I don't think I have seen it many times,' said Laurie, profoundly startled; 'I only remember one picture, and that very bad,' the young man added hastily. Forrester shook his head.

'Not in the exhibitions, I daresay, sir,' said the critic, solemnly; 'but there's a many pictures, Mr. Renton, as never get as far as the Academy. Mr. Suffolk, he did it, sir, for one; and young Mr. Warleigh, as has give up art, and gone off a engineering; and Robinson, as has fallen into the portrait line,' Forrester continued, counting on his fingers; 'and poor Mr. Tinto, as died in Italy; and there's the same subject,' the old man added, solemnly, after a pause, 'turned with its face again the wall in our hattic, as Mr. Severn hisself, sir, did when he was young.'

Laurie was overwhelmed. He gazed at the ruthless destroyer of his dreams with a certain terror. 'Good heavens, I had no idea!' said the young man, growing green with sudden despair. Then, however,

his pride came to his aid. 'It's a dreadful list,' he said; 'but, you perceive, as they never came under the public eye, and nobody was the wiser——'

'To be sure, sir—to be sure,' said Forrester, with pitying complacency. 'A many failures ain't what you may call a reason for your failing as is a new hand. I hope it 'll be just the contrary; but if you hadn't a begun of it, Mr. Renton,—and being as it's but in the chalk, it ain't to call begun;——couldn't Hedith be a looking out for her lover, sir, of an evening, as young women has a way? I don't suppose there was no difference in them old times. And a bit o' nice sunset, and him a-coming out of it with his shadow in front of him, like. I don't say as the subject's as grand, but it's a deal cheerfuller. And when you come to think of it, Mr. Renton, to hang up all them dead corpses and a skeered woman, say, in your dining-room, sir, when it's cheerful as you want to be——'

'Thanks,' said Laurie, with a little offence. 'I have no doubt you are very judicious, but I am sorry I can't see the matter in the same light. You will give Mr. Welby my compliments, please. I'll be glad to dine with him on Saturday, as he asks me. Perhaps you will be so good as to say nothing —. But no, that's of no consequence,' Laurie added, hastily. Of course he was not going to give in. Of course they must know sooner or later what he was doing, and better sooner than later. They

might laugh, or sneer, or consider him childish if they pleased; but the moment his picture was hung on the line in the Academy, all that would be changed. So Laurie mounted his high horse. But he did it in a splendid, magnanimous sort of way. He smoothed down Forrester's wounded feelings by a 'tip,' which, indeed, was more than he could afford, and which the old man took with reluctance, —and opened the door for him with his own hands. 'Offended! because you tell me how popular my subject has been? Most certainly not! Much obliged to you, on the contrary, Forrester, and very proud of your good opinion,' he said, with a most gracious smile and nod, as his critic went away, which Forrester did with a certain satisfaction mingling with his regret.

'It's for his good,' the old man said to himself; 'and there ain't no way of doing them young fellows good without hurting of their feelings.'

Laurie for his part went back to his painting-room, and sat down moodily before his big canvas. It was too ridiculous to care for such a piece of criticism. Forrester;—Mr. Welby's servant!—to think of minding anything that a stupid old fellow in his dotage might venture to say! Laurie laughed what he meant for a mocking laugh, and then bit his lip and called himself a fool. Of course the old rascal had been crammed beforehand and taught what to say; or if not, at least it was no wonder if

the servant repeated what the master thought. It was not this picture or that, but every picture that Welby had set his face against. And what a piece of idiocy to show his man, his echo,—the very first beginning,—the most chaotic indication,—such as none but an eye at once keen and indulgent could have made out,—of the great work that was to be! Laurie concluded proudly that nobody was to blame but himself, as he sat down in his first quiver of mortification, half inclined to tear his canvas across, and pitch his chalks to the other end of the room. Then he looked at it, and found his Edith looking down upon him with her tragic eyes,—eyes which to her creator looked tragic and full of awful meaning, though they were but put in in chalk. Perhaps, indeed, it was the chalk that made her divine in her despair, whitely shadowing out of the white canvas, owing everything to the imagination,—a suggestion of horror and frantic grief and misery. What if it was a common subject! The more common a thing is, the more universal and all-influencing must it be. A tender woman, made sublime by her despair, seeking on a field of battle the body of the man she loved most,—a thing of primitive passion such as must move all humanity. What if it were hackneyed! All the more distinctly would it be apparent which was the touch of the real power which could embody the scene, and which the mere painter of costumed figures. Such were

Laurie's thoughts as he sat, discouraged and cast down, before his picture,—poor fellow!—after Forrester's visit. If the man's criticisms had so much effect upon him, what would the master's have had? What could he have said to the padrona had it been she who had come to look at his picture? Then the long array of names which Forrester had quoted came back upon him. In short, poor Laurie had received a downright unexpected blow, and ached and smarted under it, as was natural to a sensitive being loving applause and approbation. He turned his back on Edith for the rest of the day, throwing open his windows, to Miss Hadley's astonishment, the first time for a week, and affording her a dim vision of a figure thrown into an arm-chair by the fire, with a novel. It was the first time since he came to Charlotte Street that he had in broad daylight and cold blood given himself over to such an indulgence. He was disgusted with his work and himself. He had not the heart to go out. He could not go to the Square, where probably by this time they were all laughing over his folly. He read his novel doggedly all the afternoon, in sight of Miss Hadley, who could not tell what to make of it. The light was gone and the day lost before he roused himself, and pitched his book into the farthest corner. His kindly spy could not tell what the perverse young fellow would do next. Probably go and have his dinner, she said to herself;

which, indeed, Laurie did; and came home much better, beginning to be able to laugh at Forrester, and snap his fingers at his predecessors. 'The more reason it should be done now,' he said to himself, 'if Suffolk, and Severn, and all those fellows broke down over it.' And he suffered a little gleam of self-complacency to steal over his face, and went to work all night at his sketch, to improve and perfect the composition. So that, on the whole, Laurie, though no genius, had that nobler quality of genius which overcomes all criticism and surmounts every discouragement. He had been shut up long enough in silence with his conception. That day, he made up his mind, instead of permitting himself to be ignominiously snubbed by old Forrester, that he would face the world, and carry the sketch which he was completing to the padrona herself.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHAT THEY THOUGHT OF IT IN THE SQUARE.

Forrester went back very full of his discovery, and there was a certain solemnity in his manner which made it evident to his master that he had something to tell. When he had delivered Laurie's message about the dinner on Saturday, he paused with a look of meaning. 'And glad he'll be of a good dinner, too, sir,' the old man said, solemnly, 'before all is done.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, Forrester,' said Mr. Welby. 'He must have been extravagant; for, after all, though it's a change to him, a man need not starve on two hundred a-year.'

'It's not now as I'm meaning, sir,' said Forrester, with a sigh. 'He's been and started in a bad way. For aught I can tell he's as well off as you and me now; but I know what it all comes to, Mr. Welby, when a young man sets hisself agoing, and won't hear no advice,—in that way.'

'God bless me! you don't mean to say the young fellow has got married?' said Mr. Welby, with agitation; for his interest in Laurie was great.

'No, sir,' said Forrester, 'worse nor that. Marrying's a lottery, but sometimes a wife's a help. You may shake your head, sir; but sometimes she's a help. It's more nor that; but I won't keep you no longer in misery. That young gentleman, sir, as you take an interest in, and I take an interest in, and the good lady up-stairs, though he's been well-instructed and had all our advice, and ain't an idiot, not to speak of, in other things, he's been and took up the Saxon line. I see, with my own eyes, a sketch of that ere blessed Hedith as is always a seeking somebody's body. He's got it stuck up on a big canvas six by ten, sir; you take my word; and you know what that comes to as well as me.'

'Bless my soul!' said Mr. Welby; and though his emotion took a different form, it was quite as genuine as Forrester's outspoken despair. He took a few turns through his studio, repeating this disclosure to himself. 'The Saxon line!' he said with horror. 'Infatuated boy! When a young man is thus bent on destroying himself, what can any one do? 'You are sure you are making no mistake?' said the R.A.; 'it was not some other fellow's canvas that had been left in his place? And what did you say to him? After all the trouble we've taken! I will never interest myself in any young man again,' said Mr. Welby, with effusion, 'not if I should live a hundred years!'

'What did I say, sir?' said Forrester. 'I told

him plain where he was going to; to destruction. I gave him a piece of my mind, sir. I spoke to him that clear as he couldn't make no mistake. I told him the times and times I've seen it done, and what followed. I counted 'em over to him,—Mr. Suffolk, and young Mr. Warleigh, and ——'

'Then you behaved like an ass,' cried the R.A., with indignation. 'Suffolk! the cleverest painter he knows. Why, there's not a man among us can hold the candle to Suffolk for some things! Why didn't you tell him of Baxter, and Robinson, and Simpson, and half-a-dozen other young fools like himself? Suffolk! A man of genius! I thought you had more sense.'

'He may be a bit of a genius,' said Forrester, standing his ground; 'but he don't sell his pictures, and Mr. Renton knows it. He was struck all of a heap, sir, when he'd heard all I'd got to say. I don't approve of the subject, nor I don't approve of the size; but as far as I could judge of the chalk, it wasn't badly put on. I wouldn't say he's a genius, but he's got a way, has Mr. Renton; and always a nice-spoken, civil gentleman, even when he's put out a bit, as he might have been to-day.'

'Pshaw!' said the master; 'that means, I suppose, that he did not kick you down-stairs. Foolish boy! after all I said to him. I daresay some of the women have put it into his head to go and distinguish himself. Go up and give my compliments to Mrs.

Severn, and I'd like to speak to her if she is not busy; and mind you don't say a word of this. Don't speak of it anywhere. I hope what you've said to him, and what I shall say to him, will bring him to his senses. Don't say a word about it to any soul.'

'I've been trusted with greater secrets,' said Forrester, with dignity. 'He'll tell her, sir, as fast as look at her; and he'll build more on her advice, though she don't know half nor a quarter. I'm a going, sir. He thinks a deal more of what she says than of either you or me.'

'Insufferable old bore!' Mr. Welby said to himself. 'Outrageous young ass! It must be those silly women that have bidden him go and distinguish himself. And what have I got to do with it, I'd like to know?' The truth was the Academician had begun to take a greater interest in Laurie than was consistent with his principles; and he wanted to blame somebody for his favourite's rebellion. He put down his palette, for he was at work at the moment, and washed his hands, and prepared for the interview he had asked. Perhaps Mr. Welby was doubly ceremonious as a kind of protest against the ease with which other members of the profession penetrated into the padrona's studio.

'A lady is a lady, however she may be occupied,' the old man said. And, in accordance with this principle, Forrester's mien and voice were very solemn when he made his appearance up-stairs.

'Master's compliments, ma'am, and if you're not busy he'd like to speak to you,' he said, standing ceremoniously at the door.

'Mr. Welby, Forrester?' said the padrona. 'Oh, surely; I shall be glad to see him. I hope there's nothing the matter. Come in and tell me what you think of this. I hope there's nothing wrong.'

'No, ma'am; not as I knows of,' said Forrester, with profound gravity. 'I don't know what else could be thought of it, but that it's a sweet little bit of colour, ma'am. You never done nothing finer nor that flesh. It's breathing, that is. Miss Alice called me in to have a look at it before you came down.'

'Miss Alice is always an early bird,' said the padrona, pleased. 'I'm glad you like it, Forrester; but I don't think I've got the light quite right here. Tell Mr. Welby I shall be glad to see him; but you look horribly grave, all the same, as if something had gone wrong.'

'No, ma'am, nothing,' said Forrester, with a glance over his shoulder;—'only about Mr. Renton, as we're afraid is in a bad way.'

'Good heavens! Laurie! What is the matter with him?' cried Mrs. Severn. The old man shook his head in the most tragical and desponding way.

'Master will tell you himself, ma'am,' Forrester said, withdrawing suddenly out of temptation and closing the door behind him. The padrona did not

know what to think. Laurie had not been visible for a week at least in the Square; but even a young man, with all the proclivities towards mischief common to that animal, cannot go very far wrong in a week. She too prepared for the impending interview, as Mr. Welby was doing. She put away all her working materials, and set the big Louis Quinze fauteuil near the fire for her visitor. She even went so far as to put a sketching-block on the table, and sat down before it with a pencil in her hand, posing half consciously, as an amateur might have posed. The padrona, though she was not timid in general, was a little afraid of her tenant. If she left her picture on the easel it was because there was no time to get it comfortably smuggled away, and some inarticulate beginning placed in its stead. She turned the Louis Quinze, however, with its back to the easel by way of security. A word of approbation from old Welby was worth gold; but yet the risk of obtaining it was one Mrs. Severn did not care to run.

A few minutes after he tapped at the door, and came in, taking off the velvet cap which,—as he knew very well,—had such a picturesque effect on his white hair. The moment he entered the room the padrona saw how vain had been her precaution in turning the Louis Quinze chair. He glanced round him with the quick artist-eye which sees everything, and went up to the easel of course as

politeness required, and delivered his little speech of courteous applause, under which Mrs. Severn discovered not a word of criticism, such as her usual visitors threw about so lightly. 'I don't think I have got the light quite here,' she said, as she had said to Forrester,—but with alarm in her face. 'Indeed, I don't see what there is to find fault with,' Mr. Welby answered, with his old-fashioned bow. Nothing could be more sweet or more unsatisfactory. The padrona almost forgot poor Laurie, as with a flush of vexation on her face she indicated to her visitor the Louis Quinze chair.

'I hope you are not over-exerting yourself, my dear madam,' the old painter said. 'I am struck dumb by your energy. Where I produce one little picture you exhibit half-a-dozen. I admire, but I fear; and, if you will let an old man say so, you must take care not to overwork your brain.'

Tears sprang to the padrona's eyes; but she kept them fixed steadily on her block, so that the old cynic, who, no doubt, knew all the commonplaces about women's tears, should not see them. She said, with all the composure she was mistress of, 'You and I are very different, Mr. Welby. Your one picture, of course, is more than worth my half-dozen; but one must do what one can.'

'No one knows better than I what Mrs. Severn can do,' said the R. A., with one of those smiles for which the padrona could have strangled him. 'I

was but taking the privilege of my age to warn you against overwork,—which is the grand disease of these times, and kills more people than cholera does. Pardon me. I want to speak to you about young Renton, in whom I know you take an interest. I advised him,' Mr. Welby said, slowly, 'to give up all idea of producing anything for the moment, and to devote himself to preparatory work,—hard work.'

'So he told me,' said the padrona, with a little spirit; for there was no mistaking the implied blame in old Welby's tone. 'And so I told him, too.'

'Then somebody has been undermining us, my dear madam,' said the R. A. 'Somebody has been egging up the foolish boy to make a name for himself, and win fame, and so forth. Forrester brings me word that he has begun a great picture. High art, life-size, Edith finding the body of Harold. The young fellow must be mad.'

'Edith finding the body of Harold!' repeated Mrs. Severn, bewildered;—and then, what with her personal agitation, what with the curious anti-climax of this announcement after her fears about Laurie, the padrona, we are obliged to confess, burst into a sudden fit of nervous laughter. She laughed till the tears came into her eyes; and, to be sure, old Welby had no way of knowing how near to the surface were those tears before.

'I confess I do not see the joke,' he said, slowly.

'Of course I have nothing to do with the boy. If he goes and makes a fool of himself, like so many others, it is nothing to me. Indeed, I don't know who advised him to come here, where one can't help seeing what he's about. He would have been a great deal better, and out of one's way, had he stayed at Kensington Gore.'

'He was paying four guineas a-week for his rooms at Kensington Gore,' said the padrona, meekly. 'It was I who advised him to come to Charlotte Street. A man cannot live on nothing. If he had given all his income for rent——'

'When I was like him I lived on nothing,' said the R.A.; 'but young men now-a-days must have their clubs and their luxuries. Why, what education has he had that he should begin to paint pictures? A few lines scratched on a bit of paper, or dabs of paint on a canvas do well enough for an amateur; but, good heavens, a painter! You don't see it, ma'am; you don't see it! Women never do. You think it's all genius, and nonsense. You will tell me it's genius that makes a Michael Angelo, I suppose; but, I tell you, it's hard work.'

'I do see it,' said the padrona. 'Sit down, please, and don't be angry with me. I see it very well; but I can't help laughing all the same. It is Laurie's way. He will never be a Michael Angelo. It is so like him to go and set up a great picture to surprise us. One of these days, if you take no

notice, he will come like Innocence itself, and invite us to go and look at it. I was afraid something was wrong with him; but this quite explains why he stayed away.'

'And that is all a woman cares for!' said Mr. Welby. 'The boy's quite well, and his absence accounted for; and what does it matter if he makes an ass of himself?' Here the painter rose, and made a little *giro* round the room, pausing at the easel with a certain vindictiveness. 'I wouldn't give much for that baby's chances of life,' he said. 'The creature will be a cripple if it grows up. It has no joints to its legs; and that little girl's got her shoulder out. There's where the elbow should come,' he went on, making an imaginary line in the air. It was the same picture he had made a pretty speech about when he came into the room, from which it may be perceived that Mrs. Severn's terror of her lodger's visit was not without cause.

'I shall be so glad if you tell me what you see wrong,' the padrona said, with, I fear, more submission than she felt.

'Wrong, ma'am,—it's all wrong!' cried the R.A.; 'there's not a line that could not be mended, nor a limb that is quite in its right place;—but I couldn't paint such a picture for my life,' Mr. Welby continued, with a sudden melting in his voice; 'nor anybody else but yourself. The body's out of drawing, but the soul's divine. Light!—nonsense,—the light's all

as it ought to be; the light's in that woman's face. I don't know how to better it. But this is not what we were talking of,' he continued, suddenly turning his back on the picture. 'We were talking of Laurie Renton. What is to be done about this ridiculous boy?'

The padrona was a little disturbed. She was overwhelmed by the praise, feeling all the sweetness of it; and she was pricked, and stung to smarting by the blame. It cost her a considerable effort to master herself, and to bring back her thoughts even to Laurie Renton. 'You must not be too hard upon him,' she said, with her voice a little tremulous. 'A mind that has any energy in it must work in its own way.' This was said half on Laurie's account, no doubt, but also half on her own, after the assault she had sustained. 'I think it would be best not to say too much about his big picture. He will read your disapproval in your eye.'

Mr. Welby shrugged his shoulders. 'I doubt if a young fellow would take much interest in reading my eye. But he may read yours, perhaps,' said the cynic, with a questioning glance, which Mrs. Severn was too much occupied to perceive, much less understand. And this was about the end of the consultation. They might admire and warn, and hold up beacons before the unwary youth, but there is no Act of Parliament forbidding a young painter to purchase for himself canvases six feet by ten, and to paint, or attempt to paint, heroic pictures thereupon. His

advisers might regret and might do their best to turn him to wiser ways, but that was all; and the question was not urgent enough to demand the sacrifice of the very best hours of a November day,—which, heaven knows! are short enough for a painter's requirements, in a district so rapidly reached by the rising fog from the city as Fitzroy Square.

It was the evening of the next day before Laurie carried out his resolution. With a little impatience he waited till it was dark, or nearly so, and then, with his sketch under his arm, went round the corner to the Square. To carry a portfolio or a picture under your arm is nothing wonderful in these regions; and I think it was something of a foppery on Laurie's part to wait till the twilight; but, on the whole, it was rather Mr. Welby and old Forrester he was afraid of than the general public. The padrona was,—as he knew she would be,—in her dining room, sitting in the fire-light, with a heap of little scorched, shining faces about her, when he went in. One good thing of these short winter days was, that the woman-painter had a special hour in which it was impossible to do anything, and a perfectly legitimate indulgence to play with the little ones to her heart's content. They were all upon her, — little Edie seated upon her mother's lap, with her arms closely clasped round her neck, and the boys on either side embracing her shoulders. 'She is my mamma,' said little Edie; 'go away, you boys.' 'She is my mamma as well,'

said Frank and Harry, with one voice. They could not see Laurie as he came in softly into the ruddy, warm, homelike darkness, nor hear the voice of the maid who opened the door for him; and Laurie, soft-hearted as he was, lingered over this little glimpse of those most intimate delights with which neither he nor any other stranger could intermeddle. When he saw the mother with her children,—who were all hers, and in whom no one else had any share,—the helpless, hopeful, joyous creatures, encircled by the woman's soft, strong arms, which were all the protection, all the shelter they had in this world,—his heart melted within him, the foolish fellow! Alice sat at her piano in the drawing-room, playing the soft dream-music which was natural to the hour; and to her, had he been like other young men, Laurie's thoughts and steps would naturally have turned; instead of which he stood gazing at her mother, who at that moment no more remembered him than if there had been no such being in existence. Laurie's heart melted so that he could have gone and sat down on the hearth-rug at her feet, as one of the boys did, had he dared, and asked her to let him help her and stand by her. Help her in what? Laurie gave no answer to his own question; and, to be sure, he could not stand in the dark for more than a minute spying upon the fireside hour. He put down his sketch on a side-table with a little noise, which made the padrona start.

'I am not a ghost,' said Laurie, coming into the warmer circle of the firelight.

'Then you should not behave as such,' Mrs. Severn said, holding out her hand to him with a smile; and then the mere accident of the moment brought him beside little Frank on the hearth-rug, as he had thought, with a little sentimental impulse, of placing himself. He sat down on the child's stool, and held out his hands to the fire, and looked up at the padrona's face, which shone out in glimpses by the cheerful firelight. Sometimes little Edith, with her wreath of hair, would come between him and her mother like a little golden, rose-tinted, cloud; sometimes the fitful blaze would decline for a moment, and throw the whole scene into darkness. But Mrs. Severn did not change her attitude, or put down the child from her lap, or ring for the lamp, on Laurie's arrival. He came in without breaking the spell,—without disturbing the calm of the moment. And after an absence of more than a week, and some days' work and seclusion, it is not wonderful if he felt as if he had suddenly come home.

'This would not be a bad time to lecture you, as I am going to do,' said the padrona. 'He has been very naughty, children; he ought to be put in the corner. Let us make up our minds what we will do to him, now we have him here.'

'Give him some bad sums to do, mamma,' said little Harry, whose life was made a burden to him in

that way; 'or make him write out fifty lines; and don't tell him any stories. What have you done, Mr. Renton? I want to know.'

'Give him a bad mark in the pantomime book,' said Frank. Now, the pantomime-book was a ledger of the severest penalties; the bad marks disabled a sinner altogether from the enjoyment of the highest of pleasures, and was as good as a pantomime lost. The savage suggestion awoke the sympathy of little Edie on her mother's knee.

'What has he done?' said Edie. 'Poor Laurie! But mamma won't listen to these cruel boys. Mamma listens to me. I am the little princess in the new picture. Mamma, I love Laurie. Make him go down on his knees and beg pardon, and I know he will never do it any more.'

'I will never do it any more,' said Laurie, with one knee upon the hearth-rug. There was something in the soft, genial warmth, and kindly, flickering light, the touches of the children, and their sweet, ringing tones,—the face of their mother now and then shining upon him, and her voice coming out of the shadow,—which captivated him in some unintelligible way. There was no romance in the matter, certainly. She was years older than he was, and thought of him as a grandmother might have thought. But Laurie Renton was that kind of man. His heart was full of tenderness and sympathy, and a certain sense of the pathos of the situation which did not strike the chief

actors in it. Mrs. Severn thought herself a happy woman,—notwithstanding all that had befallen her,—when she sat down by her fire, and felt the soft pressure of those soft, baby arms; but to Laurie there was a pathos in it which brought the tears to his eyes. 'I will never do it any more,' he said; 'I will do whatever mamma tells me. I will be her servant if she will let me.' Perhaps it was well for Laurie that the children immediately burst into a chorus of laughter and jubilation over his proposal. 'He will be our Forrester, and do everything we tell him,' cried the boys; and the padrona, carried away by their delight, thought nothing of the bended knee nor the unnecessary fervour of submission. I doubt even if she heard very clearly what he said, or was the least aware of his attitude; but probably instinct warned her that there was enough of this. She rang the bell, which was close to her hand, without saying anything. After all, the firelight and the hearth-rug was only for the children and herself. And I think Laurie even was a little ashamed of his temporary intoxication when the lamp came in, carried by the maid, bringing back the light of common evening,—the clear outlines of prose and matter-of-fact.

It was not till after tea that he brought his sketch to exhibit it. The children had gone up-stairs, and Miss Hadley had returned home, and no evening visitor had as yet arrived. When Laurie was left alone with the padrona, she laid down her needlework and lifted

up her eyes to him, beaming with a kindly light. 'I have something serious to say to you now,' she said. 'I have been hearing dreadful things about you. You have not taken our advice.'

'Our advice! I don't know what that means,' said Laurie. 'There is but one padrona in the world, and her advice I always take.'

'Do not be hypocritical,' said Mrs. Severn. 'You promised to paint no pictures, but to be busy and study and do your work; and here you have set up an Edith as big as Reginald Suffolk's, and you call that taking my advice.'

'Here she is,' said Laurie, producing his sketch. He placed it on the table, propped up against the open workbox, and took the lamp in his hand that the light might fall on it as it ought. He did not defend himself. 'I kept away as long as I could, meaning not to tell you yet; but that did not answer,' said Laurie; 'and here she is.'

The padrona put away her work out of her hands, and gave all her attention to the new object thus placed before her; and whatever might be the qualities of Edith, the group thus formed was pictorial enough;—the room all brightness and warmth, centering in the pure light of the lamp which Laurie held up in his hand; the fair, ample, seated figure gazing earnestly at the little picture, with her own face partially in the shade,—behind her the open

doors of the larger room, dark, but warm, with a redness in it of the fire, and a pale gleam from the curtained windows. But the actors in this still interior were unconscious of its effect. She was looking intently at the sketch, and he, pausing to hear what she should say of it, holding his breath.

'Put down the lamp,' said the padrona after a pause, 'it is too heavy to hold, and I can see. And sit down here till I speak to you. You have not taken our advice.'

'I understand,' said Laurie, and his lip quivered a little, poor fellow! 'That means I may take away the rubbish. You need not say any more, for it will pain you. I understand.'

'You don't understand anything about it,' said Mrs. Severn, putting out her hand to retain the sketch where it was. 'Let me say out my say. I don't want to like it. I wish I could say it was very bad. If it had been atrocious it would have been better for you, you rash boy! But I must not tell any fibs. I like the sketch; there is something in it. I can't tell how you should know about that woman, expecting every moment to see—— Yes, put her away, Laurie, for a little; her eyes have gone to my heart.'

Laurie put down his creation upon the table with a face all glowing with pride and delight. 'I hoped you would like it,' he said; 'but that it should move you,——' and in his gratitude he would have kissed

the hand of the friend to whose counsel he owed so much. As for the padrona, she withdrew her hand quickly, with a momentary look of surprise.

'But I have more to say,' she went on. 'You must wait till you have heard me out. Don't be vexed or disappointed. I doubt if you will ever make any more of her. Now don't speak. I will say to you what I have never said to any one. How many sketches like that have I seen in my life, full of talent, full of meaning! It is not a sketch;—it is all the picture you will paint of that subject. I know what I am saying. She who is so real in that, with her awful expectations, will be staring like a woman on the stage in the big picture. I know it, Laurie. I have seen such things, over and over again.'

Laurie said nothing. He saw her eyes, which were still fixed on his sketch, suddenly brim over, and silently, in two big drops, which fell at Edith's feet. Mortification, disappointment, and, at the same time, a kind of consolatory feeling, took possession of him. The downfall was great from the first flush of joy in her approbation; but yet—— Clearly it was of poor Severn she was thinking. Poor Severn, of whom it was certainly the fact that he never did anything good except in sketches. Laurie's heart rose magnanimous at this thought. If that was all, how soon he could prove to her that he was a different man from poor Severn! 'It is not worth a tear,' he

said; 'never mind it. I ought to have known that it would bring things to your mind——'

'It is not that,' said the padrona, recovering herself; 'it is because I am anxious you should not waste your strength. Put it up again where it can be seen, or, rather, bring it into the other room, where there is a better place. Take the lamp, and I will take the picture. I like it,' she said, as she followed him into the larger drawing-room. 'Let it stand here, where it can be seen. And I will send for Mr. Welby if he is at home. I like it very much;—but I don't want you to paint the big picture all the same.'

'If you like it, that is reason enough why I should paint the big picture,' said Laurie. If the padrona discerned the touch of tender enthusiasm in his tone, she took no notice whatever of it, but busied herself placing the sketch in the most favourable light.

'Mr. Welby came up-stairs, and insulted me, on your account,' she said with a laugh. 'Oh, don't look furious. I don't want any one to fight my battles. But it is cruel of him, all the same. He congratulated me on my energy, and on sending six pictures to the Exhibitions where he sent one. It was very ill-natured of him,—a man who has had a whole long life to perfect himself, and nothing to hurry him on. Does not he think, I wonder, that even I would like to take time and spare no labour, and paint something that would last and live?' Mrs. Severn said, with a flush coming over her face.

'And so you do, and so they will,' said Laurie, carried away by his feelings. The padrona shook her head.

'No,' she said, 'I don't deceive myself. I get money for my pictures, and that is about what they are worth. But don't you think, Laurie,—you who understand things that are not spoken,—don't you think it sometimes makes my heart sick, to feel that, if I could but wait, if I could but take time, I might do work that would be worth doing,—real work,—one picture, say, that would have a whole soul in it? But I can't take time: there are the children, and daily bread; and — he taunts me that I paint six pictures for his one!'

'Padrona mia, nothing that could be painted would be half so good as you are,' cried Laurie, not knowing in the thrill and pain of sympathy what he said.

'I shou' like to paint something that would be better than me,' said the padrona, 'but I cannot. I have to work for their bread,—and you feel for me when I tell you this. And don't you see,—don't you see why I bid you work?' cried the artful woman, suddenly turning upon him, standing on her own heart, as it were, to reach him. 'There is nothing to urge you into execution, to compel you to exhibit and sell and get money. Why don't you take the good of your blessed leisure, you foolish boy? Never think of the Academy, nor of what you will paint, nor of

what people think. Make yourself a painter, Laurie, now that you have your life in your hands, and heaps of time, and nothing to urge you on. But, good heavens! here are people coming,' cried Mrs. Severn,—'to find me flushed and half crying over all this, I declare. Talk to them till I come back, and I will send down the child to help you; and don't forget what I've been saying,' she said, as she rushed out of the room.

This assault had been so sudden, so trenchant, so effective;—he had been led so artfully to the softness of real feeling, in order to have the thrust made at his most unguarded moment, that Laurie stood confused when his Mentor left him, not quite sure where he was, or what had happened. Had it been any stranger who had appeared, Mrs. Severn's young friend would have made made a poor impression upon her visitor; but, happily, it was Alice who came in,—Alice with her curls,—harmonious spirit, setting the house to music, as her mother said. This was all poor Laurie made by his honesty in carrying his Edith, in her earliest conception, for the approval of the Square.

THE END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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